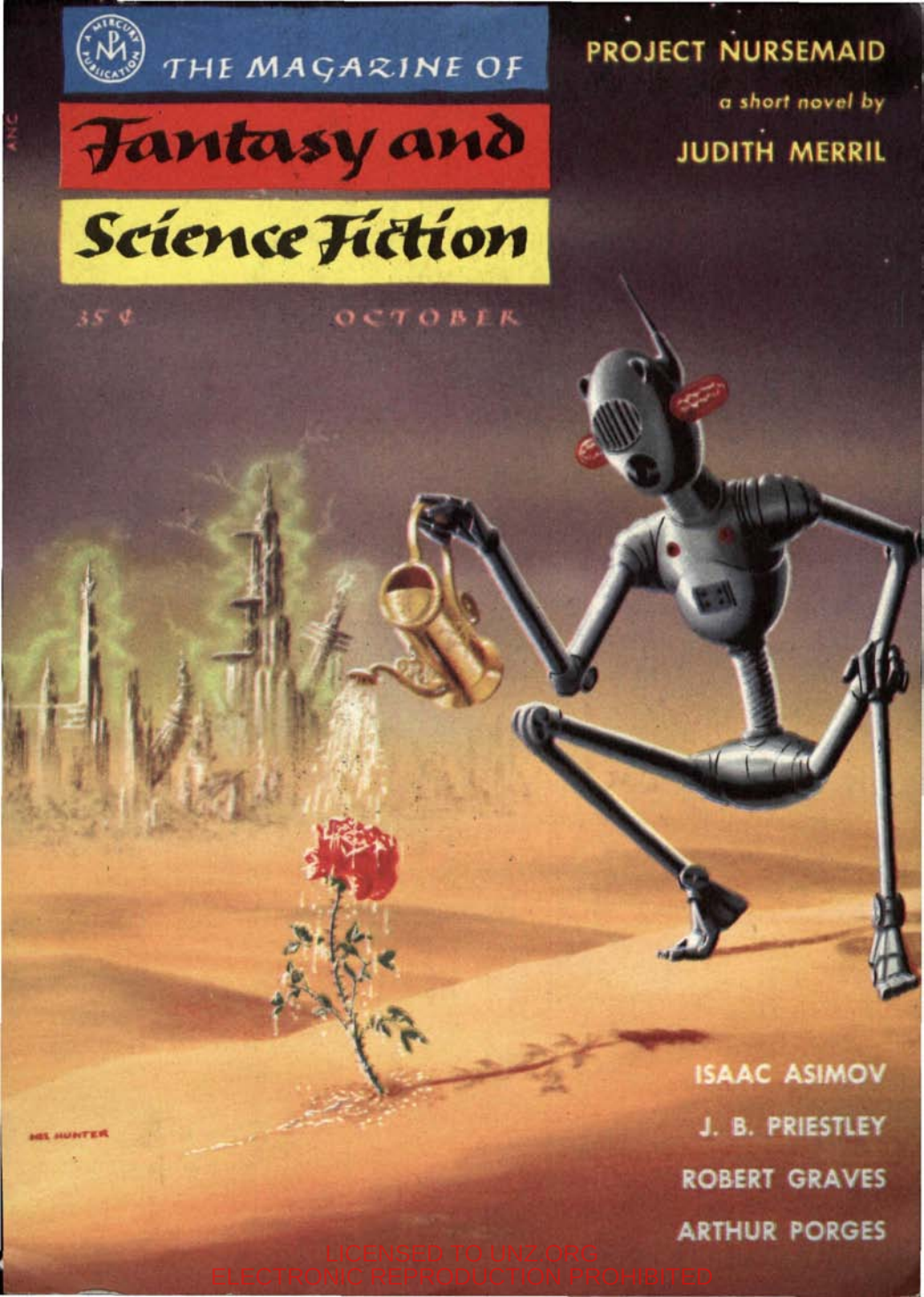

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 9, No. 4 OCTOBER

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EXCITING MYSTERY READING

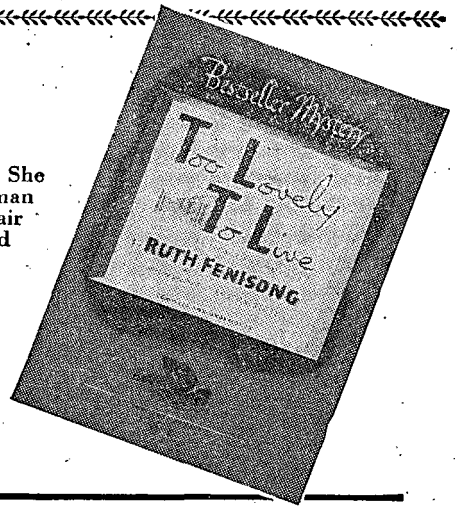
TOO LOVELY TO LIVE

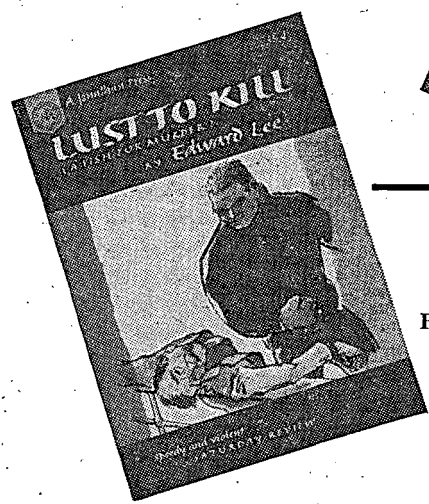
(formerly "Miscast for Murder")

by Ruth Fenisong

Bess Culhane had to see her father. She didn't know about the once-lovely woman lying on his hotel bed, her dark hair matted with blood. ". . . neatly plotted . . ." the *Boston Globe.*

A BESTSELLER MYSTERY





LUST TO KILL

(formerly "A Fish for Murder")

by Edward Lee

Red Blake knew that the scantily clad women and the humming roulette wheels held the threat of sudden death for him — by a murderer whose blood lust bore the mark of madness. ". . . speedy and violent . . ." *Saturday Review.*

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At the time that you read this, science fiction has just received as important a distinction as has ever been bestowed upon it by a critic of mainstream literature: Martha Foley's THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1955 *(Houghton Mifflin), which appears almost simultaneously with this issue, contains Judith Merril's* Dead Center *(F&SF, November, 1955). Miss Foley, most eminent of judges of today's short story, has occasionally included s.f. in her annuals before, but always from "slick," "quality" or "little magazine" sources; she has frequently cited s.f. (particularly, I'm pleased to say, from F&SF) in her lists of "Distinctive Short Stories" and "Distinctive Volumes of Short Stories"; and now at last she grants full recognition to a story from a popular, "pulp" s.f. magazine. It's not surprising that the first author to attain this critical Mach 1 is Judith Merril. "I am," Foley has written, " in quest of literary adventure. When I feel that I have had an adventure in reading a story, when I think reading it has been a memorable experience, I hope that the readers of this volume also will find it memorable." For it is this quality of memorability — deriving from personal emotional impact in writing of the people of the future rather than the things or theories — that has marked Merril's fiction, from her striking debut-story* That Only a Mother (Astounding, *June, 1948) through her novel* SHADOW ON THE HEARTH (*Doubleday, 1950*) *on to* Dead Center . . . *and to* Project Nursemaid. *The longest Merril story in five years, this short novel tells of a Project, yes — a fascinatingly detailed attempt to adjust the human race to low- and null-gravity; but primarily it is a story of people, and a tender and memorable one.*

Project Nursemaid

by JUDITH MERRIL

THE GIRL IN THE WAITING ROOM WAS very young, and very ill at ease. She closed the magazine in her lap, which she had not been reading, and leaned back in the chair, determined to relax. It was an interview, nothing more. If they asked too many questions or if anything happened that looked like trouble, she could just leave and not come back.

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And then what . . . ?

They wouldn't, anyhow. The nurse had told her. She didn't even have to give her right name. It didn't matter. And they wouldn't check up. All they cared about was if you could pass the physical.

That's what the nurse had said, but she didn't *like* the nurse, and she wished now that she had bought a wedding ring after all. Thirty-nine cents in the five-and-ten, and she had stood there looking at them, and gone away again. Partly it was knowing the salesgirl would think she was going to use it for a hotel, or something like that. Mostly, it was just — *wrong*. A ring on your finger was supposed to mean something, even for 39 cents. If she had to lie with words, she could, but not with . . . That was silly. She should have bought it. Only what a ring meant was one thing, and what Charlie had meant was something else.

Everybody's got to learn their lesson sooner or later, honey, the nurse had said.

But it wasn't like that, she wanted to say. Only it was. It was for Charlie, so what difference did it make what *she* thought?

She should have bought the ring. It was silly not to.

"I still say, it's a hell of a way to run an Army."

"You could even be right," said the Colonel, and both of them smiled. Two men who find themselves jointly responsible for a vitally important bit of insanity, who share a strong, if reluctant, mutual respect for each other's abilities, and who disagree with each other about almost everything, will find themselves smiling frequently, he had discovered.

The General, who was also a politician, stopped smiling and added, "Besides which, it's downright immoral! These girls — *kids!* You'd think . . ."

The Colonel, who was also a psychologist, stopped smiling too. The General had a daughter very much the same age as the one who was waiting outside right now.

"It's one *hell* of a way to run an Army."

The Colonel nodded. His concept of morality did not coincide precisely with the General's, but his disapproval was not one whit less vehement. He had already expressed his views in a paper rather dramatically entitled "Brave New World???" which dealt with the predictable results of regimentation in prenatal and infantile conditioning. The manuscript, neatly typed, occupied the rearmost position in a folder of personal correspondence in his bottom desk drawer, and he had no more intention of expressing his views now to the General than he had of submitting the paper for publication. He had discovered recently that he could disapprove of everything he was doing, and still desire to defend his right to do it;

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beyond doubt, it was better than supervising psych checks at some more conventional recruiting depot.

"A *hell* of a way," he agreed, with sincerity, and glanced meaningfully at his appointment pad.

Thursday was apparently not the General's day for accepting hints gracefully from junior officers; he sat down in the visitor's chair, and glared. Then he sighed.

"All right, so it's still the way we have to run it. Nobody asked you. Nobody asked me. And I'll say this, Tom, in all fairness, you've done a fine job on one end of it. We're getting the babies, and we're delivering them too . . ."

"That's more your work than mine, Hal," the Colonel lyingly demurred.

"Teamwork," the General corrected. "Not yours or mine, but both of us giving it everything we've got. But on this other business, now, Tom —" His finger tapped a reprimand on the sheaf of papers under his hand. "— Well, what comes first, Tom, the chicken or the egg? All eggs and no hens, it just won't work."

The General stopped to chuckle, and the Colonel followed suit.

"The thing is, now we've got the bastards — and I mean no disrespect to my uniform, Colonel, I'm using that word literally — now we've got 'em, what're we going to do with 'em?"

His fingers continued to tap on the pile of reports, not impatiently, but with emphasis.

"I don't say it's your fault, Tom, you've done fine on the other end, but if you're going to bounce everybody who can pass the physicals, and if everyone who gets by you is going to get blacked out by the medics, well — I don't know, maybe the specs were set too high. Maybe you've got to — well, I don't want to tell you how to do your job, Tom. I don't kid myself about that; I know I couldn't fill your shoes if I tried. All I can do is put it squarely up to you. You've got the figures there in front of you. *Cold figures*, and you know what they mean."

He stopped tapping long enough to shove a neatly typed sheet an inch closer to the other man. Neither of them looked at the sheet; both of them knew the figures by heart.

"Out of three hundred and thirty-six applicants so far, we've accepted thirty-eight. We've had twenty-one successful Sections to date," the General intoned. "And six of those have been successfully transported to Moon Base. Three have already come to term, and been delivered, healthy and whole and apparently in good shape all around.

"Out of one hundred and ninety-six applicants, we have so far accepted exactly *three* — one, two, three — foster parents. Only one of those is on the Base now. She's been on active duty since the first delivery — that was August 22, if I remember right, and *that* makes twenty-five days today that she's been on without relief.

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"Mrs. Kemp left on the rocket this morning. She'll be on Base — let's see —" He shuffled rocket schedules and Satellite-Moon Base shuttles in his mind. "— Wednesday, day after tomorrow. Which makes twenty-*seven* days for Lenox. If Kemp's willing to walk in and take over on a strange job, Lenox can take a regular single leave at that point; more likely she'll have to wait for the next shuttle — thirty-one days on duty, Tom, and most of it carrying full responsibility alone. And *that's* not counting the two days she was there before the first delivery, which adds up to — let's see — thirty-three altogether, isn't it?"

The Colonel nodded soberly. It was hard to remember that the General happened to be right, and that the figures he was quoting were meaningful, in terms of human beings. Carefully, he lowered mental blinds, and managed to keep track of the recital without having to hear it all. He knew the figures, and he knew the situation was serious. He knew it a good deal better than the General did, because he knew the *people* as well as how many there were . . . or weren't.

More women on more rockets would make the tally-sheet look better, but it wouldn't provide better care for the babies; not unless they were the *right* women. He waited patiently for a break in the flow of arithmetic, and tried to get this point across. "I was thinking," he began. "On this leave problem — couldn't we use some of the Army nurses for relief duty, till we catch up with ourselves? That would take some of the pressure off and I'd a lot rather have the kids in the care of somebody we didn't know for a few days than send up extra people on one-year contracts when we do know they're not adequate."

"It's a last resort, Tom. That's just what I'm trying to avoid. I'm hoping we *won't* have to do that," the General said ominously. "Right now, this problem is in our laps, and nobody else's. If we start asking for help from the Base staff, and get *their* schedules fouled up — I tell you, Tom, we'll have all the top brass there *is* down on us."

"Of course," he said. "I wasn't thinking of that angle . . ." But he let it go. No sense trying to make any point against the Supreme Argument.

"Well, that's my job, not yours, worrying about things like that," the General said jovially. But all the time, one finger, as if with an independent metronomic existence of its own, kept tapping the pile of psych reports. "But you know as well as I do, we've got to start showing better results. I've talked to the Medics, and I'm talking to you. Maybe you ought to get together and figure how to . . .

"No, I said I wouldn't tell you how to do your job, and I won't. But we've *got* to have somebody on that December 8 rocket. That's

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the outside limit, and it means you've got three weeks to find her. If nobody comes up, I don't think we'll have any choice but to reconsider some of the rejects, and see if we can settle on somebody between us."

The General stood up; so did the Colonel. "I won't keep you any longer, Tom. I believe there's a young — *lady?* — outside waiting for you." He shook his head. "It's good thing *I* don't have to talk to them," the General said feelingly.

The Colonel, again, agreed.

They both smiled.

The intercom phone on the Wac's desk buzzed. The girl sat up straight, watching. The Wac picked up the receiver and listened and said crisply, "Yes, sir," and hung up and pushed back her chair and went through the door behind the desk, into the Colonel's office.

The girl watched, and when the door closed, her eyes moved to the wall mirror over the long table on the opposite wall, and she wondered if she would ever in her life achieve the kind of groomed smartness the Wac had. She was pretty; she knew that without looking in the mirror. But it seemed to her that she was bulky and shapeless and *unformed.* Her hair was soft and cloudy-brownish, where the Wac's was shiningly coifed and determinate in color; and where the Wac was trim and tailored, the contours of her own body, under the powder-blue suit, were fluid and vaguely indistinct.

It's just a matter of getting older, she thought, and she wondered what the Wac would do in the spot she was in. But it wouldn't happen. A woman like that wouldn't let it happen. Anybody who could keep each hair in place that way could keep a hold on her emotions, too; or at least make sure it was safe, ahead of time.

The door opened, and the Wac smiled at her. "You can go in now, Mrs. Barton," she said, a little too kindly.

She knows! The girl could feel the heat flame in her cheeks. *Of course!* Everybody here would know what was the matter with the girls who went in to see Colonel Edgerly. She walked stiffly past the other woman, without looking at her.

"Mrs. Barton?" The Colonel stood up, greeting her. He was too young. Much too young. She could never talk to him about — there was nothing to talk about. She didn't have to tell him about anything. Only he should have been older, and not so nice-looking.

He pulled up a chair for her, and went through all the ordinary gestures of courtesy, getting her settled. He was wearing a Colonel's uniform all right, but he didn't look like one, and he didn't act like one. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his desk drawer, offered her one, and lit it for her. All that time, she didn't have to say anything; and by then, she was able to talk.

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The application form was a necessary formality. He wrote down the name and address she gave, and a little doubtfully, after AGE, *nineteen*. She surprised him by claiming *student* as her occupation, instead of the conventional *housewife*, but everything else went according to expectations. She had had measles and mumps, but no chicken pox or scarlet fever or whooping cough. No operations, no previous pregnancies, no congenital conditions. He checked down the list rapidly, indifferently. When she'd had her physical, they'd know the accurate answers to all these things. Meantime, the girl was answering familiar questions that she had answered a hundred times before, in less frightening places, and they were getting near the bottom of the sheet.

He looked over at her, smiling a little, frowning a little, and his voice was apologetic with the first personal, and pertinent, question. "Have you had a medical examination yet?"

"No, they said the interview was first . . . Oh! You mean for . . . ? Yes. Yes, *of course.*"

"Do you know how far along you are?" His eyes were on the form, and he scribbled as he talked.

She took a deep breath. "Eleven weeks," she said. "The doctor said last week it was ten, so — so I guess it's eleven now," she finished weakly.

"Do you think your husband would be willing to come down for a physical? We like to get records on both parents if we can . . ." There was no answer. He looked up, and she was shaking her head; her face was white, and she wasn't breathing at all.

"You're quite sure?" he said politely. "It's not *necessary;* but it does work to the advantage of the child, if we have as much information as possible."

"I'm sorry," she said tightly. "He — " She paused, and made up her mind. "He doesn't know about it. We're both still in school, Colonel. If I told him, he'd think he had to quit, and start working. I can't tell him."

It sounded like the truth, almost, but her face was too stiffly composed, and the pulse in her temple beat visibly against the pale mask. Her words were too precise, when her breath was coming so quickly. She wasn't used to lying.

"You realize that what you're doing here is a real and important contribution, Mrs. Barton? Don't you think he might see it that way? Maybe if I talked to him . . . ?"

She shook her head again. "No. If it's that important, I guess I better . . ." The voice trailed off, almost out of control, and her lips stayed open a little, her eyes wide, frightened, not knowing what the end of that sentence could possibly be.

The Colonel pushed the printed sheet away from him, and looked at her intently. It was time for the last question.

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"Mrs. Barton — What do people call you, anyway? Cecille? Cissy? Ceil? Do you mind. . . ?"

"No, that's all right. Ceil." It was a very small smile, but she was obviously more comfortable.

"All right, Ceil. Now look — there's a line on the bottom there that asks your reason for volunteering. I wish it wasn't there, because I don't like inviting lies. I know, and everybody connected with this project knows, that it takes some pretty special motivation for a woman to volunteer for something like this. Occasionally we get someone in here who's doing it out of pure and simple — and I do mean simple — patriotism, and then I don't mind asking that question. I don't think that applies to you . . . ?"

She shook her head, and tried a smile.

"Okay. I wanted to explain my own attitude before I asked. I don't care why you're doing it. I'm damn glad you are, because I think you're the kind of parent we want. You'll go through some pretty rugged tests before we accept you, but by this time I can usually tell who'll get through, and who won't. I think you will. And it's in the nature of things that if you *are* the right kind, you'd have to have a pretty special personal reason for doing this . . . ?"

He waited. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. She tried again, and when she swallowed, he could almost feel in his own throat the lump that wouldn't let her lie come out. He pulled the application form closer to him, and wrote quickly in the last space at the bottom, then shoved it across, so she could see:

I think I'm too young to raise a child properly, and I want to help out.

"All right?" he asked gently. She nodded, and there were tears in her eyes. He opened the top drawer and got her some kleenex. Again she started to say something, and swallowed instead; then the dam broke. He wheeled his chair over to hers, and reached out a comforting hand. Then her head was on his shoulder, and she was crying in loud snuffly childish sobs. When it began to let up, he gave her some more kleenex, and got his chair back in position so he could kick the button under the desk and dim the light a little.

"Still want to go through with it?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Want to tell me any more?"

She did; she obviously wanted to very much. She kept her lips pressed firmly together, as if the words might get out in spite of herself.

"You don't have to," he said. "If you want to, you understand it stops right here. The form is filled out already. There's nothing else I have to put on there. But if you feel like talking a little, now that we're —" He grinned, and glanced at the damp spot on his shoulder, "— now that we're better acquainted — well, you might feel better if you spill some of it."

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"There's nothing to tell," she said carefully. "Nothing you don't already know." Her face was expressionless; there was no way to tell what she meant.

"All right," he said. "In that case, sit back and get comfortable, because *I've* got some things to tell you. The Colonel is about to make a speech." She smiled, but it was a polite smile now; for a minute, she had warmed up, now they were strangers again.

He had made the same speech, with slight variations, exactly 237 times before. Every girl or woman who got past him to the medics heard it before she went. The wording and the manner changed for each one, but the substance was the same.

All he was supposed to do was to explain the nature and purposes of the Project. Presumably, they already knew that when they came in, but he was supposed to make sure. He did. He made very sure that they understood, as well as each one was able, not only the purposes, but the nature: what kind of lives their children might be expected to lead.

It never made any difference. He knew it wouldn't now. Just once, a woman had come to them because she had been warned that carrying a child to term would mean her death and the baby's, both. She had listened and understood, and had asked soberly whether there were any similar facilities available privately. He had had to admit there were not. The process was too expensive, even for this purpose, except on a large-scale basis. To do it for one infant would be possible, perhaps, for a Rockefeller or an Aga Khan — not on any lesser scale. The woman had listened, and hesitated, and decided that life, on any terms, was better than no life at all.

— But this girl with her tremulous smile and her frightened eyes and her unweathered skin — this girl had not yet realized even that it was a human life she carried inside herself; so far, she understood only that she had done something foolish, and that there was a slim chance she might be able to remedy the error without total disaster or too much dishonor.

He started with the history of the Project, explaining the reasons for it, and the thinking behind it: the psychosomatic problems of low-grav and null-weight conditions; the use of hypnosis, and its inadequacies; the eventual recognition that only those conditioned from infancy to low-grav conditions would ever be able to make the Starhop . . . or even live in any comfort on the Moon.

He ran through it, but she wasn't listening. Either she knew it already, or she just wasn't interested. The Colonel kept talking, only because he was required to brief all applicants on this material.

"The problem was how to get the babies to the Base. So far, nobody has been able to take more than four

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months of Moon-grav without fairly serious somatic effects, or else a total emotional crackup. It wasn't practical to take families there, to raise our crop of conditioned babies, and we couldn't safely transport women in their last month of pregnancy, or new-born babies, either one."

She was paying attention, in a way. She was paying attention to *him*, but he could have sworn she wasn't hearing a word he said.

"The operation," he went on, "was devised by Dr. Jordan Zamesh, of the Navy . . ."

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly. "About your uniform."

"Uniform . . . ?" He glanced at the spot on his shoulder. "Oh, that's all right. It's almost dry, anyhow. Dacron." *Damn!* He'd miscalculated. She was too young to stew over a brief loss of control this way — but she'd been doing it anyhow, and *he hadn't noticed.* Which was what came of worrying about your boss when you were supposed to have your mind on the customers. *Damn!* And double it for the General. She might have been ready to talk, and he'd rushed into his little speech like an idiot while she sat there getting over the sobbing-spell. All by herself. Without any nice sympathetic help from the nice sympathetic man.

"I guess," she was saying, "I suppose you're used to that?"

"I keep the kleenex handy," he admitted.

"Does *every*body —?"

"Nope. Just the ones who have sense enough to know what they're doing. The high-powered patriots don't, I guess. All the others do, sooner or later, here or someplace else." He looked at her, sitting there so much inside herself, so miserably determined to sustain her isolation, so falsely safe inside the brittle armor of her loneliness. She had cried for a minute, and cracked the armor by that much, and now she hated herself for it.

"What the hell kind of a woman do you think you'd be?" he said grimly. "If you'll pardon my emphasis — what the hell kind of woman could give a baby away without crying a little?"

"I didn't have to do it on your uniform."

"You didn't have to, but I'm glad you did."

"You don't have to feel . . ." She caught herself, just in time, and the Colonel restrained a smile. She had almost forgotten that there wasn't any reason to feel sorry for *Mrs. Barton.*

She smoothed out her face, regained a part of her composure. "I'm sorry," she said. "All I do is apologize, isn't it? Now I mean I'm sorry, because I wasn't really listening to you. I was too embarrassed, I guess. I'll listen now."

He'd lost her again. For a moment, there had almost been contact, but now she was gone, alone with her shell of quiet politeness. The Colonel went on with his speech.

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". . . the operation is not dangerous," he explained, "except insofar as any operation, or the use of anesthesia, is occasionally dangerous to a rare individual. However, we have managed to cut down on even that narrow margin; the physical exams you'll get before the application is approved will pretty well determine whether there is any reason why you should not undergo operative procedure.

"Essentially, what we do is a simple Caesarian section. There are modifications, of course, to allow the placenta and membrane to be removed intact, but these changes do not make the operation any more dangerous.

"There is a certain percentage of loss in the postoperative care of the embryos. Occasionally, the nutritive surrogate doesn't 'take,' whether because of miscalculations on our part, or unknown factors in the embryo, we can't tell, but for the most part, the embryos thrive and continue to grow in normal fashion, and the few that have already been transported have all survived the trip—"

"Colonel . . . ?"

He was relieved; he hadn't *entirely* misread her. She was a nice girl, a good girl, who would be a good wife and mother some day, and she interrupted just where she ought to.

"Yes?" He let himself smile a little bit, and she took it the right way.

"Does — Is — I mean, you said, the operation isn't dangerous. But what does it do as far as — having babies later goes?"

"To the best of our knowledge, it will not impair either your ability to conceive or your capacity to carry a baby through a normal pregnancy. Depending on your own healing potential, and on the results of some new techniques we're using, you *may* have to have Caesarians with any future deliveries."

"*Oh!*"

As suddenly as it had happened before, when she cried, the false reserve of shame and pride and worry fell away from her. Her eyes were wide, and her tongue flickered out to wet her upper lip before she could say, "*There'll be a scar!* Won't there? This time, I mean?"

There were two things he could say, and the one that would comfort her would also seal her away again behind the barrier of proper manners and assumed assurance. He spoke slowly and deliberately:

"Perhaps you'd better tell your husband beforehand, Ceil. . . ."

She stared at him blankly; she'd forgotten about the husband again. Then she sat up in her chair and looked straight at him. "*You know I'm not married!*" she said. She was furious.

The Colonel sat back and relaxed. He picked up the application blank he had filled out, and calmly tore it down the center.

"All right," she said tiredly. She

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stood up. "I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"You didn't," he said quietly. "Not unless you've changed your mind, that is."

Halfway to the door, she turned around and looked at him. She didn't say anything, just waited.

He took a fresh form out of his drawer, and motioned to the chair. "Sit down, won't you?" She took a tentative half-step back towards him, and paused, still waiting. He stood up, and walked around the desk, carefully not going too close to her. Leaning on the edge of the desk, he said quietly, in matter-of-fact tones:

"Look, Ceil, right now you're confused. You're so angry you don't care what happens, and you're feeling so beat, you haven't got the energy to be mad. You don't know where you're going, or where you *can* go. And you don't see any sense in staying. All right, your big guilty secret is out now, and I personally don't give a damn — except for one thing: that it *had* to come out before we could seriously consider your application."

He watched the color come back to her face, and her eyes go wide again. "You mean —?" she said and stopped. Looked at the chair; looked at the door; looked at him, waiting again.

"I mean," he said, "bluntly, that I used every little psychological trick I know to get you to make that Horrible Admission. I did it because what we're doing here is both important and expensive, and we don't take babies without knowing what we're getting. Besides which, I think you're the kind of parent we want. I didn't want to let you get away. I hope you won't go now." He reached out and put a hand on her arm. "Sit down, won't you, Ceil? It won't hurt to listen a while, and I think we can work things out."

This time he pretended not to notice the tears, and gave her a chance to brush them away, and get settled in the chair again, while he did some unnecessary rummaging around in his closet. After that it went smoothly. They stuck to the assumed name, Barton, but he got her real name as well, and the college she was going to. She lived at school; that would make the arrangements easier.

"We can't do it till the fifth month," he explained. "If everything goes all right till then, we can probably arrange for an emergency appendectomy easily enough. You'll come in for regular check-ups meanwhile; and if things start to get too — *obvious*, we'll have to work out something more complicated, to get you out of school for a while beforehand. The scar is enough like an appendix scar to get away with," he added.

The one thing he had really been disturbed about was her age, but she insisted she was really nineteen, and of course he could verify that with the school. And the one thing she

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wouldn't break down about was the father's name. He decided that could wait. Also, he left out the unfinished part of his speech: the part about the training the children would have. For this girl, it was clear, the only realities were in the immediate present, and the once-removed direct consequences of present acts. She was nineteen; the scar mattered, but the child did not. Not yet.

He took her to the outer office and asked Helen, at the desk, to make an appointment for her with Medical and to give her the standard literature. Helen pushed a small stack of phone messages over to him, and he riffled through. Just one urgent item, a woman in the infirmary with a fit of postoperative melancholia. *They're all in such a damn hurry to get rid of the babies*, he thought, *and then they want to kill themselves afterwards!* And this nice girl, this pretty child, would be the same way. . . .

Helen had Medical on the phone. "Tell them I'll be right down," he told her, "for Mrs. Anzio. Ten-fifteen minutes."

She nodded, confirmed the time and date for Ceil's appointment, and repeated the message, then listened a minute, nodding.

"All right, I'll tell him." She hung up, pulled a prepared stuffed manila envelope out of her file, and handed it to the girl. "Four fifteen, Friday. Bring things for overnight. You'll be able to leave about Sunday morning." She smiled professionally, scribbling the time on an appointment-reminder slip.

"I'll have to get a weekend pass — to stay overnight," the girl said hesitantly.

"All right. Let us know if you can't do it this weekend, and we'll fix it when you can." The Colonel led her to the door, and turned back to his secretary inquiringly.

"They said no rush, but you better see her before you leave today. They're afraid it might get suicidal."

"Yeah. I know." He looked at her, smart and brisk and shiny, the perfect Lady Soldier. She had been occupying that desk for three weeks now, and he had yet to find a chink or peephole in the gleaming wall of her efficiency. *And for an old Peeping Tom like me, this is going some!* The thought was indignant. "You know what?" he said.

"Sir?"

"This is a *hell* of a way to run an Army!"

"Yes, sir," she said; but she managed to put a good deal of meaning into it.

"I take it you agree, but you don't approve. If it will make you feel any better, I have the General's word for it. He told me so himself. Now what about this Browne woman?"

"Oh. She called twice. The second time she told me she wants to apply for FP. I told her you were in conference, and would call her back. She was very — insistent."

"I see. Well, you call her back,

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and make an appointment for tomorrow. Then . . ."

"There's another FP coming tomorrow afternoon," she reminded him. "A Mrs. Leahy."

"Well! Two in one day. Maybe business is picking up. Put Browne in first thing in the morning. Then call the Dean of Women at Henderson, and make an appointment for me — I'll go there — any time that's convenient. Sooner the better. Tell her it's the Project, but don't say what about." There were three more messages; he glanced at them again, and tossed them back on her desk. "You can handle these. I better go see that Anzio woman."

"What shall I tell General Martin, sir?" She picked up the slip with the message from his office, and studied it with an air of uninformed bewilderment.

The Perfect Lady Soldier, all right, he decided. *No bucks passed to her.* "Tell his *secretary* that I had to rush down to Medical, and I'll ring him back when I'm done," he said, and managed to make it sound as if that was what he'd meant all along.

II

In the morning, very slightly hung over, he checked first with the Infirmary, and was told that Mrs. Anzio had been quiet after he left, had eaten well, and had spent the night under heavy sedation. She was quiet now, but had refused breakfast.

"She supposed to go home today?"

"That's right, sir."

"Well, don't let her go. I'll get down when I have a chance, and see how she sounds. Who's O.D. down there? Bill Sawyer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, tell him I'd suggest stopping sedation now."

"Yes, sir."

He hung up and buzzed Helen. "You can send Miss Browne in now."

Miss Browne settled her bony bottom on the edge of the visitors' chair. She was dressed in black, with one smart-looking gold pin on her lapel to show she was modern and broad-minded — and a mourning-band on her sleeve, to show she wasn't *too* forgetful of the old-fashioned proprieties. She spoke in a faintly nasal whine, and used elegant, refined language and diction.

It took about 60 seconds to determine that she could not be seriously considered for the job. It took another 60 minutes to go through the formality of filling out an application blank, and hearing her reasons for wanting to spend a year at Moon Base in the service of the State. It took most of the rest of the morning to compose a report that might make clear to the General just why they could not use an apparently healthy woman of less than thirty-five years, with no dependents or close attachments (her father had just died, after a long illness, during

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which she had given up "*everything*" to care for him), with some nursing experience, and with a stated desire to "give what I can for society, now that there is nothing more I can do for my beloved father."

Give, he thought. *Give till it hurts. Then give a little more, till it hurts as much as possible.* It was inevitable that this sort of job should attract the martyr types; inevitable, but still you wondered, when nine-tenths of the population had never heard of the Project, just how so *many* of this kind came so swiftly and unerringly to his waiting room.

He wrote it down twice for the General: once with psychological jargon, meant to impress; and again with adjectives and examples, and a case history or two, meant to educate. When he was done, he had little hope that he had succeeded in making his point. He signed the report and handed it to Helen to send up.

Mrs. Leahy, in the afternoon, was a surprise.

She walked into his office with no sign of either the reluctance-and-doubt or the eagerness-and-arrogance that marked almost every applicant who entered there. She sat down comfortably in the visitors' chair, and introduced herself with a friendliness and social ease that made it clear she was accustomed to meeting strangers.

She was a plump — not fat — attractive woman, past her first youth, but in appearance not yet what could be called middle-aged. He was startled when she stated her age as forty-seven; he was further startled when she stated her occupation.

"Madam," she said, and chuckled with pleasure when he couldn't help himself from looking up sharply. "You don't know how I've been waiting to see your face when I said that," she explained, and he thought wearily, *I should have known. Just another exhibitionist.* For a few minutes, he had begun to think he had one they could use.

"Do you always show your feelings all over your face like that?" she asked gleefully. "You'd think, in your job — The *reason* I was looking forward to saying it was — well, two reasons. First, I figured you'd be one of these suave-faced operators, professionally unshockable, and I wanted to jolt you."

"You did, and I am," he said gravely. "Usually."

She smiled. "Second, I'm not often in a position to pull off anything like that. People would disapprove, and what's worse, they'd refuse to wait on me in stores, or read me lectures, or — anyhow, it seemed to me that here I could just start out telling the truth, seeing that you'd find out anyhow. I don't suppose the people you accept get sent up before you've checked them?"

"You're right again." He pushed his chair back, and decided to relax and enjoy it. He liked this woman. "Tell me some more."

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She did, at length and entertainingly. She was a successful businesswoman. She had proved that much to her own satisfaction, and now she was bored. The house ran itself, almost, and was earning more money than she needed for personal use. She had no real interest in expanding her operations; success for its own sake meant nothing to her. She had somehow escaped the traditional pitfalls of Career; maybe it was the specialized nature of her business that never let her forget she was a woman, and so preserved her femininity of both viewpoint and personality.

It was harder to understand how she had managed to escape the normal occupational disease of her world: the yearning for respectability and a place in conventional society. Instead she wanted new places, new faces, and something to do that would make use of her abilities and give scope to her abundant affections.

"I've never had children of my own," she said, and for the first time lost a trace of her aplomb. "I — you realize, in my business, you don't start out at the top? A lot of the girls are sterile to start with, and a lot more get that way. Since I started my own place, the girls have been almost like my own — some of them, the ones I keep — but . . . I think I'd like to have some real babies to take care of." Her voice came back to normal: "Getting to grandmother age, I guess."

"I see." He sat up briskly, and finished the official form, making quick notes as she parried his questions with efficient quiet answers. When he was done, he looked up and met her eyes, unwillingly. "I may as well be frank with you, Mrs. Leahy —"

"Brushoff?" she broke in softly.

He nodded. "I'm afraid so." She started to get up, and he reached out a hand, involuntarily, as if to hold her in her seat. "Don't go just yet. Please. There's something I'd like to say."

She sat still, waiting, the bitterness behind her eyes veiled with polite curiosity.

"Just . . ." He hesitated, wanting to pick the right words to get through her sudden defenses. "Just that, in my personal opinion, you're the best prospect we've had in six months. I haven't got the nerve to say it in so many words, when I make my report. But I didn't fill out that form just to use up more of your time. If it were up to me, you'd be on your way down for a physical exam right now. Unfortunately, I am not the custodian of moralities in this Army, or even on Project.

"What I'm going to do is send in a report recommending that we reserve decision. I'll tell you now in confidence that we're having a hard time getting the right kind of people. The day *may* come —" He broke off, and looked at her almost pleadingly. "You understand? I

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can't recommend you, and if I did, I'd be overruled. But I wish I could, and if things change, you may still hear from us."

"I understand." She stood up, looking tired; then, with an effort, she resumed her cheerful poise, and took his offered hand to shake goodby. "I won't wish you bad luck, so — goodby."

"Goodby. And thank you," he said with sincerity, "for coming in."

Then he wrote up his report, went down to see the Anzio woman, cleared her for release, and went home where a half-empty bottle waited from the night before.

There was no summons from the General waiting for him in the morning, and no friendly, casual visit during the hour before he left to see Dean Lazarus at Henderson. He didn't know whether to regard the silence as ominous or hopeful; so he forgot it, temporarily, and concentrated on the Dean.

He approached her cautiously, with generalizations about the Project, and the hope that if she were ever in a position to refer anyone to them, she would be willing to cooperate, etc. etc. She was pleasant, polite, and intelligent for half an hour, and then she became impatient.

"All right, Colonel, suppose we come to the point?"

"What point did you have in mind?" he countered warily.

"I have two students waiting outside to see me," she said, "and I imagine you also have other business to attend to. I take it one of our girls is in what is called 'trouble'? She came to you, and you want to know whether I'll work with you, or whether the kid will get bounced out of school if I know about it. Stop me if I'm wrong."

"Go on," he said.

"All right. The answer is, it depends on the girl. There are some I'd grab any chance to toss out. But I'd guess, from the fact that she wound up coming to you, she either isn't very experienced or she *is* conscientious. Or both."

"I'd say both, on the basis of our interview."

She looked him over thoughtfully. *Lousy technique*, he thought, and had to curb a wicked impulse to ham up his role and confuse her entirely; it wasn't often he had a chance to sit in the visitors' chair.

That studying look of hers would put anybody on the defensive, he thought critically, and then realized that maybe it was meant to do just that. Her job didn't have the same requirements as his.

"Let me put it this way," she said finally. "I'm here to try to help several hundred adolescent females get some education into their heads, and I don't mean just out of books. I'm *also* here to see to it that the College doesn't get a bad reputation: no major scandals or suicides, or anything like that. If the girl is worth helping, and if you want my

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cooperation in a plan that will keep things quiet and respectable, and make it possible for her to continue at school — believe me, you'll have it."

That left it squarely up to him. Was the girl "worth helping"? or rather: would Dean Lazarus think so?

"I think," he said slowly, "I'll have to ask you to promise me first — since your judgment and mine may not agree — that you won't use any information you get from me *against* the girl. If you don't want to help, when you know who it is, you'll just sit back. All right?"

She thought that over. "Providing I don't happen to acquire the same information from other sources," she said.

"Without going *looking* for it," he added.

"I'm an honest woman, Colonel Edgerly."

"I think you are. I have your word?"

"You do."

"The girl's name is Cecille Chanute. You know her . . . ?"

"*Ceil!* Oh, my God! Of course. It's always the ones you don't worry about! Who's the boy? And why on earth don't they just get married, and . . . ?"

He was shaking his head. "I don't know. She wouldn't say. That's one thing I thought you might be able to help me with. . . ."

He left very shortly afterwards. *That* part, at least, would be all right. Unless something unexpected turned up in the physical, the only problem now was getting the necessary data on the father.

When he got back to the office, the memo from the General was on his desk.

TO: Edgerly
FROM: Martin

[No titles. Informal. That meant it wasn't the death-blow yet.

Not quite.]

RE: Applicants for PN's and FP positions.

After reading your reports of yesterday, 9/16, and after giving the matter some thought, bearing in mind our conversation of 9/15, it seems to me that we might hold off on accepting any further PN's until the FP situation clears up. Suggest you defer all further interviews for PN's. Let's put our minds to the other part of the problem, and see what we can do. This is urgent, Tom. If you have any suggestions, I'll be glad to hear them, any time.

It was signed, in scrawly pencil, *H. M.* Just a friendly note. But attached to it was a detailed schedule of PN acceptances, operations, shipments, and deliveries to date, plus a projected schedule of operations, shipments, and theoretical due dates for deliveries. The second sheet was even adjusted for statistical expectations of losses all along the line.

What emerged, much more clearly than it had in the General's solemn speechmaking, was that it would be

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necessary not only to have one more Foster Parent trained and ready to leave in less than three months, but that through January and February they would need at least one more FP on every biweekly rocket, to take care of the deliveries *already* scheduled.

Little Ceil didn't know how lucky she was. *Just in under the wire, kid.* She was lucky to have somebody like that Lazarus dame on her side, too.

And *that* was an idea. People like Lazarus could help.

He buzzed Helen, and spent most of the rest of the day dictating a long and careful memo, proposing a publicity campaign for Foster Parent applications. If the percentage of acceptances was low, the logical thing to do about it was increase the totals, starting with the applications. Now that he'd have more time to devote to FP work, with the curtailments on PN, he might fruitfully devote some part of it to a publicity campaign: discreet, of course, but designed to reach those groups that might provide the most useful material.

The Colonel was pleased when he had finished. He spent some time mapping out a rough plan of approach, using Dean Lazarus as his prototype personality. Social workers, teachers, personnel workers — these were the people with the contacts and the judgment to provide him with a steady stream of referrals.

Five women to find in two months — with this program, it might even be possible.

The reply from the General's office next morning informed him that his suggestion was being considered. For some weeks, apparently, it continued to be considered, without further discussion. During that time, the Colonel saw Ceil Chanute again, after her Med report came through okayed, and then went to see Dean Lazarus once more.

Neither of them had had any luck finding out who the boy was. They worked out detailed plans for Ceil's "appendectomy," and the Dean undertook to handle the girl's family. She felt strongly that they should not be told the truth, and the Colonel was content to let her exercise her own judgment.

At the end of the two weeks, another applicant came in. The Colonel tried his unconscientious best to convince himself the woman would do; but he knew she wouldn't. This time it took less than an hour for an answer from the General's office. A phone call, this time.

". . . I was just thinking, Tom, until we start getting somewhere on the FP angle — I notice you've got six PN's scheduled that aren't processed yet. Three-four of them, there are loopholes. I think we ought to drop whatever we can . . . ?"

"If you think so, sir."

"Well, it makes sense to me. There's one the Security boys

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haven't been able to get a complete check on; something funny there. And this gal who won't tell us the father's name. And the one who was supposed to come in last week and postponed it. We can tell her it's too late now . . . ?"

"Yes, sir. I'll have to see them, of course. These women are pretty desperate, sometimes. They — well, I think it would be better to consider each case separately, talk to each one — There's no telling what some of them might do. We don't want any *un*favorable publicity," he said, and waited for some response to the pointed reminder.

There was none. "No, of course not. You use your judgment, Tom, that's all, but I'd like to have a report on each one — just let me know what you do about it. Every bit of pressure we can get off is going to help, you know."

And that was all. Nothing about his Memo. Just a gentle warning that if he kept on being stubborn, he was going to be backed up a little further — each and *every* time.

He got the file folders on the three cases, and studied two of them. The "Barton" folder he never even opened. He found he was feeling just a little more stubborn than usual.

Sergeant Gregory came in, and he dictated a letter of inquiry to the woman who had failed to keep her appointment, then instructed the Sergeant to call the other one, and make an appointment for her to come in and see him. "But first," he finished, "get me Dean Lazarus at Henderson, will you?"

III

Waiting out there in the room with the Wac and the mirror was almost as bad as it had been the first time. Something was wrong. Something had happened to spoil everything. It had to be that, or he couldn't have got her called out of class. Not unless it was *really* important. And how did he explain it to Lazar anyhow?

She sat there for five minutes that seemed like hours, and then the door opened and he came out with a welcoming smile on his lips, and all of a sudden everything was all right.

"Hi. You made good time, kid. Come on in."

"I took a cab. I didn't change or anything." It *couldn't* be very bad, if he looked so calm.

"Well, don't change next time either," he said, closing the door behind them. "Jeans are more your speed. And a shirt like that coming in here once in a while does a lot to brighten up my life."

The main thing was, he had said *next time*. She let out a long breath she didn't know she'd been holding, and sat down in the big chair.

"All right," he said, as soon as he had gone through the preliminary ritual of lighting cigarettes. "Now listen close, kid, because we are in

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what might be called a jam. A mess. Difficulties. Problems."

"I figured that when you called." But she wasn't really worried any more. Whatever it was, it couldn't be *very* bad. "I was wondering — what did you tell the Dean?"

"The Dean . . . ? Oh, I told her the truth, Ceil. About two days after you first came in."

"You *what?*" Everything was upside down; *nothing* made sense. She had been asked to one of Lazar's teas yesterday. The old girl had been sweet as punch today about the call, and excusing her from classes. "*What* did you say?" she asked again.

"I said, I told her the truth, away back when. Now, listen a minute. You're nineteen years old and you're a good girl, so you still respect Authority. Authority being people like Sarah Lazarus and myself. Only it just so happens that people like us are human beings too. I don't expect you to *believe* that, just because I say it, but try to pretend for a few minutes, will you?" There was a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. She didn't know whether to be angry or amused or worried. "I went in to see Mrs. Lazarus in the hope that she'd cooperate with us in planning your 'appendectomy.' It turned out she would. She thinks a lot of you, Ceil, and she was glad to help."

"You took an awful chance," she said slowly.

"No. I made sure of my ground before I said anything. A lot surer than I am now. I think when you get back, you better go have a talk with the lady. And after that, you better remember that she's keeping her mouth shut, and it would be a good idea if you did the same. You realize the spot *she'd* be on, if other girls found out . . . ?"

She flushed. "I'm not likely to do much talking," she reminded him, and immediately felt guilty, because Sally knew. It was Sally who had sent her to that doctor . . .

"Everybody talks to *some*body," he said flatly. "When you feel like you have to talk, try to come here. If you can't, just be careful who it is."

His voice was sharp and edgy; she'd never heard him talk that way before. *I didn't do anything*, she thought, bewildered. He cleared his throat, and when he spoke again, his voice sounded more normal.

"All right, we've got that out of the way. Now: the reason I asked you to come in such a hurry — well, to put it bluntly, and without too much detail, there've been some policy changes higher-up here, and there's pressure being put on me to drop as many of the PN's coming up as I can find excuses for."

PN's? she wondered, and then realized — *PreNatal.*

". . . I didn't want to do this. I hoped you'd tell me in your own time." She'd missed something; she tried to figure it out as he went along. "If you didn't — well, we've handled two-three cases before where

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the father could not be located."

Oh!

"Till now," he went on, "I thought if we couldn't convince you that it was in the best interests of the child for you to let us know, we might be able to get by without insisting. But now I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to tell me whether you want to or not. I'll promise to use every bit of tact and discretion possible, but —"

"I *can't*," she broke in.

"Why not?"

"Because . . . I can't." If she told the reason, it would be as bad as telling it all.

"Not even if it means you can't have the operation?"

That's not fair! There was nothing she could say.

"Look, Ceil, if it's just that you don't want him to know, we might be able to work it that way. Most people have physical exams on record one place or another, and the little bit more that we like to know about the father, you can probably tell us — or we can find out other ways. Does that change the picture any?"

She bit her lip. Maybe they *could* get all the information without — not without going through the Academy, they couldn't. It was there, *that* was true enough. Charlie wouldn't have to know at all — not till they kicked him out of school, that is! She shook her head.

"Look," he said. He was pleading with her now. Why didn't he just tell her to go to hell and throw her out, if it was all that important? Why should it matter to *him?*

"Look, I'm supposed to be sending you a regretful note right now. But the fact is, if I can put in a report that you came in *today*, before I could take any action, and that you voluntarily cleared up the problem . . . do you understand?"

"Yes," she said. "I think I do."

"You're thinking that this is a trick? I tricked you once before, so that you told me what you didn't mean to. Now I'm doing it again? Is that it?"

"Aren't you?"

"No." His eyes met hers, and held there. She *wanted* to believe him. He had admitted it the other time — but not till after he found out what he wanted to know.

"Maybe I don't *know*," she said spitefully. That was silly, a childish thing to say. Suddenly she realized he hadn't spoken since she said it, and —

Migod! Suppose he believes it! She looked up swiftly, and found a smile on his lips.

"Why on earth would you tell me a thing like that?" he asked mildly. "Are you feeling wicked today?"

All right, she thought, *you win.* But she needed a few minutes; she had to think it out. "Thank you," she said, stalling, but also because she meant it.

"You're welcome I'm sure. What for?"

"At the doctor's I went to —

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they asked me *if* I knew who it was."

The Colonel smiled. "You're a nice girl, Ceil. Don't forget it. You're a nice girl, and it shows all over you, and anybody who can't see it is crazy. That doctor should have his head examined."

"It wasn't the doctor. It was the nurse."

"That explains it." When he grinned like that, he seemed hardly any older than she was.

"You mean she was just being — well, *catty*?"

"That's one way of putting it." He opened his bottom desk drawer, and pulled out a round shaving mirror, with a little stand on it. She took the mirror hesitantly, when he handed it to her. *Jonathan Jo had a mouth like an O, And a wheelbarrow full of surprises* . . . or a desk drawer. She held the mirror gingerly, not sure what it was for.

"I'm sorry," she giggled. "I don't shave yet. I'm too young."

He smiled. "Take a look."

She didn't want to. She looked quickly, and tried to hand it back, but he didn't take it. He left it lying on the desk.

"All right," he said. "Now: do you remember what the other lady looked like? The nurse?"

"She was blonde," Ceil recalled slowly. "Dyed-blonde, I mean, and her skin was sort of — I guess she had too much powder on. But she was kind of good-looking."

"Was she? How old do you think she was?"

"Oh, maybe, I don't know — forty?"

"*And why do you suppose she was working in a place like that?*"

She sat there, and tried to think of an answer. What kind of reason would a woman have for working for that kind of a doctor? All she could think of was what her mother would have said: *Well, you know, dear, some people just don't* care. *I don't suppose she thinks about it, just so long as she earns a living. They're well paid, you know.*

That's what was in the back of her own mind, too — until she stopped to think about it; and then she couldn't figure out an answer. She couldn't think of *any* reason that could make *her* do it.

She looked at him hopelessly, like a child caught unprepared in grammar school, and she saw he was grinning at her again. Not in a mean way; it was more as if he were pleased with her for *trying* to answer than making fun because she couldn't.

Maybe the important thing was just to try. That's what he'd been trying to tell her. That was the way *he* thought about people, all the time.

"I can't tell you his name," she said, and took a deep breath and let out a rush of words with it, all run together: "He's-a-cadet-at-the-Space-Academy-they'd —" She had to stop and breathe again. "They'd throw him out."

"I don't think so," he said

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thoughtfully. "I think we could manage it so they . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You don't know how tough they are there —" she insisted, and then stopped herself. "I guess you do."

He was silent for a moment, and then he said unexpectedly, "Nope. You're right." His voice was bitter. "That's *exactly* what they'd do." He sat and thought some more; then he smiled, looking very tired. "All right. All we really care about with the father is the physical exam. If you want to get in touch with him yourself, and ask him to come in, using any name he wants, that would do it. Or if you'd rather, you can tell me, off the record, and I'll get in touch. But either way, you have my word his name won't get any farther than this chair without your permission."

She thought about that. She ought to do it herself, but . . . "I'd trust *you*," she said. "If that's all right. If you don't mind. I'd — just as lief not — I don't really want to see him, if I don't have to."

"Any way you want it, kid." He wrote down the name, when she told him, on a piece of paper from his memo pad: *Charles Bolido*. He drew a line slowly under the two words; then he looked up at her, and down at the pad again, and drew another line, very dark and swift, beneath the first.

"Look, Ceil, it's none of my business if you don't want to talk about it, but — well, are you sure you know what you want to do? Before I get in touch with the boy — well, put it this way: are you giving *him* a fair break? I gather you're not on very good terms any more, and you say he doesn't know about the baby. Maybe —"

"*No*," she said.

He smiled. "Okay, kid. It's your life, not mine. Only one thing: what do I do if *he* wants to see *you*? Suppose he *wants* to quit school and get married?"

"He won't," she said, but she had to clear her throat before the words came out right. "He won't." And she remembered. . . .

. . . the grass was greener than any grass had ever been, and the water was bluer, and the sky was far and high above and beyond while he talked about the rockets that would take him on top of the fluffed-out clouds, and away beyond the other side of the powder-puff daytime moon. The sun trailed across the vaulting heaven, and the shade of the oak tree fell away from them. They were hot and happy, and he jumped up, and took her hands, and she stood up into his arms.

"Love you, babe," he whispered in her ear.

She leaned back and looked up at him and in the streaming sunlight he seemed to be on fire with beauty and strength and youth and she said, "I love you, Charlie," savoring the words, tasting them, because she had never said them before.

She thought a frown crossed his

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face, but she wouldn't believe it, not then. He took her hand, and they ran together down into the water.

It wasn't till later, in the car, that she had to believe the frown; that was when he began explaining carefully, in great detail, what his plans were, what a Spaceman's life was like, and why he could not think about marriage, not seriously about any girl.

He never even knew it had been the first time for her, the only time. . . .

She couldn't explain all that. She sat still and looked at the man across the desk, the man with the nice smile and the understanding eyes and the quiet voice. *Charlie has wavy black hair*, she remembered; the Colonel's was sandy-colored and straight, crew-cut. Charlie had broad shoulders and his skin was bronzed and he had a way of tilting his head so that he seemed to be looking off into the distance, too far for *her* to see. The Colonel was nice-enough-looking, but his skin was pale and his shoulders a little bit round — from working indoors, at a desk, all the time, she supposed. Only, when he looked at you, he *saw* you, and when he listened, he understood. She couldn't explain the whole thing, but of course, she didn't have to . . . not to him.

"He won't want to," she said quietly; she had no trouble talking now. "If he says so, he won't really mean it. He — he *couldn't* give up the Space school. That's all he ever wanted. It's the only thing that matters to him." She said it evenly, in a detached objective way, just the way she wanted to, and then she sat absolutely still, waiting for what he'd say.

He tapped his pencil, upside down, on the top of the desk. She couldn't see his face at all. Then he looked up, and he had a made-up smile on his face this time, a smile he didn't *mean*. He nodded his head a little. "I see." Then he stood up, and came around to the side of the desk where she was sitting, and put both his hands on her shoulders, and with his thumbs against the sides of her jaw, he tilted her face up, so she was looking straight at him.

"You're a good girl, Ceil." He meant *that*. "You're a hell of a good girl, and the chances are Charlie is a lot better than you give him credit for. *There*for —" He laughed, and let go of her shoulders, and leaned back against the desk. ". . . I am *not* going to give you the fond paternal kiss I had in mind a moment ago. You might misunderstand." He grinned. "Or you might *not*."

He wanted her to go now. She stood up, but there was a feeling of something more she had to say. "I wish you had," was what she said, and she was horrified. She hadn't even *thought* that.

"All right," he said. "Let's pretend I did. Didn't you wear a coat?"

"I had a jacket. I guess I left it outside."

He had the door open. "I'll let you know how it turns out," he

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promised her, and then he turned around and started talking to the Wac.

He didn't even see her out the other door.

IV

Once each month, on the average, a Miracle came to pass, and a woman entered Colonel Edgerly's office who seemed, in his judgment, emotionally fit to undertake a share of the job of giving 200 homeless, motherless, wombless infants the kind of care that might help them grow up to be mature *human* beings.

He had thought the Miracle for this month was used up when Mrs. Leahy came in. It was a Major Miracle, after all, when one of these women could also pass the Medical and Security checks, as well as his own follow-ups with the formal psych tests. To date, in almost nine months of interviewing, there had been only three such Major Miracles.

Mrs. Serruto, the Colonel suspected, was not going to be the fourth. But if she failed, it would likely be in Medics; meantime, he could have the satisfaction at least of turning in one more favorable preliminary report.

She came in the morning after his interview with Ceil, without an appointment, and totally unexpected — a gift, he decided, directly from a watchful Providence to him. Virtue had proved an inadequately self-sufficient reward through a restless night; but surely Mrs. Serruto had been Sent to make recompense.

Little girls with big blue eyes should keep their transferences out of my office, he wrote rapidly on a crisp sheet of white paper. He underlined it, and added three large exclamation points. Then he filed it neatly in his bottom desk drawer — the same one that held his unpublished article — and turned to Mrs. Serruto with a smile. She was settled and comfortable now, ready to talk; and so was he. He pulled over an application pad, and began filling things in, working his way to the bottom, and the important personal questions.

He paused a moment at OCCUPATION — but it couldn't happen twice. It didn't. "Housewife," she said quietly; then she smiled and added, "But I think I'm out of a job. That's why I came."

He listened while she told him about herself and her family, and he actually began to hope. Her son was in the Space Service already, on the Satellite. He'd just passed his year of Probationary, and now the daughter-in-law had qualified for a civilian job up there. The young wife and the two grandsons had been living with her; the grandmother kept house, while the mother went to school, to learn astronomical notation.

Now the girl was going up to be with her husband and to work as an Observatory technician and secre-

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tary; the boys would go to Yuma, to the school SpaServ maintained for just that purpose.

"We weren't sure about the boys," Mrs. Serruto explained. "We talked it over every which way, whether they'd be better off staying with me, or going to Yuma, but the way they work it there, the children all have a turn to go up Satellite on vacations, and they have an open radio connection all the time. And of course, it's such a wonderful school. . . . It was just they seemed awfully young to be on their own, but this way they'll be closer to their own parents than if they were with me."

"What made you decide on a Foster Parent job, Mrs. Serruto?" *Let her just answer right once more,* he prayed, to whatever Providence had sent her there. *Just once more . . .* "Most of the applicants here are a good deal younger than you are," he added. "It's unusual to find a woman of your age willing to start out in a strange place again." He smiled. "A *very* strange place."

"I — Oh, it's foolish for me to try to fool you, isn't it? You're a trained psychologist, I guess? Well, all the reasons you'd think of are part of it: I'm not young, but I still have my strength, thank the Lord, and I kind of *like* the idea of something new. Lots of people my age feel that way; look at all the retired people who start traveling. And keeping house in the same town for thirty-two years can kind of give you a yen to see the world. But if you want the honest answer, sir, it's just that I *heard,* I don't know if it's true, but I heard that if you get one of these jobs, you spend your leaves on Satellite . . . ?"

She was watching him anxiously; he had to restrain his own satisfaction, so as not to mislead her. She wasn't in yet, by a long shot — but he was going to do everything he could to get her there.

"That's right," he told her. "In theory, you get four days off out of every twenty. The shuttle between Base and Satellite is on a four-day schedule, and one FP out of every five is supposed to have leave each trip. Actually, that only gives you about 45 hours on the Satellite, allowing for shuttle-time. And at the beginning, you may not get leave as regularly as you will later on." He realized what he was doing, and stopped himself, switching to a cautious third-person-impersonal. "There's been a good deal of research done on what we call LGT, Mrs. Serruto — that's short for Low Gravity Tolerance. We don't know so much yet about *No*-Grav, but they're collecting the data on that right now. There's a pamphlet with all the information we have so far; you'll get a copy to take home with you, and then if you still want to apply, and if you can pass the tests, there's a two-months' Indoctrination Course, mostly designed to prepare the candidate for the experience of living under Moon-Grav conditions.

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"The adjustment isn't easy, no matter how much we do to try and simplify it. But the leave schedule we're using has worked out, for regular SpaServ personnel. That is to say, we've cut down the incidence of true somatic malfunctions —"

She made a funny despairing gesture with hands and shoulders. He smiled. "Put it this way: Low-grav and No-grav do have some direct — call it *mechanical* effects on the function of the human body. But most of these problems are cumulative. It takes — let's see, at Moon-grav, which is about one sixth of what you're used to, it takes from ten to twelve months, in the average case, for any serious mechanical malfunctions to show up — I should have let you read the pamphlet first," he said. "They've got it all explained there, step by step."

He paused hopefully, but she obviously didn't want to wait; she wanted to hear it now. "Anyhow," he went on, "we found, by experimenting, that the total tolerance could be extended considerably by breaking up the period. To put it as simply as possible: the lower the gravity, the shorter the time before serious 'structural' malfunctions begin to appear — you understand? When I say 'structural' I mean not only that something isn't working right, but that there's been actual physical damage done to the body in some way, so that it *can't* work right."

The faint frown went away, and she nodded eagerly.

"All right. The lower the gravity, the quicker the trouble. Also, the shorter the time-span, the more you can take. That is, a person whose total tolerance at any particular low gravity is, say, six weeks — taken at a stretch — can take maybe ten or twelve weeks if he does it a few days at a time, with leaves spent at normal, or at least higher, gravity.

"The reason for this last fact is that even before the structural malfunctions begin to appear, most people start suffering from all kinds of illnesses — usually not serious, at first, but sometimes pretty annoying — and these are *psychogenic*. . . ."

He looked at her inquiringly, and she nodded, a little uncertainly.

"Very few of the body functions actually *depend* on gravity," he explained. "I mean *internal* functions. But all of us are *conditioned* to performing these functions under a normal Earth-gravity. A person's digestive system, for instance, or vasc — circulatory system, will work just as well with low gravity, or none; but it has to work a little differently. And the result is a certain amount of confusion in the parts of the brain that control what we call 'involuntary' reflexes: so that the heart, for instance, tries to pump just as hard as it should to suit the environment it's in — and *at the same time* it may be getting messages from the brain to pump just as hard as it's used to doing.

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"When that happens you *may* — or anyone may — develop a heart condition of some kind; but it's just as likely that the patient might come up with purely psychological symptoms. *Or* any one of the various psychogenic diseases that result from ordinary internal conflicts, or anxiety states, may develop instead —"

Now she was shaking her head in bewilderment again. "Look," he said. Enough was enough. "This is all in the reading matter you'll get when you leave today. And it's a lot clearer than I can make it. For now, just take my word for it, on account of the psych end of it, four months has been set as the limit of unbroken Moon duty. However, we've found that people can take up to a year there with no bad effects at all, *if* they get frequent enough leave. That's why it's set up the way it is now."

"You mean one year is all?" she asked quickly. "That's the most?"

He shook his head. "No. That's the standard tour of duty on the present leave system. Here's how it works: You sign a year's contract, which is really for sixteen months, except the last four months are Earth leave. During the twelve months on the moon, you get twenty per cent Satellite leave. That means you spend one-fifth of your time at a higher gravity. Not Earth-normal: the Satellite's set at three-quarters — you know that?"

She shook her head. "I didn't know. I knew it was less than here on Earth, but the way Ed described things there, I thought it was a lot less than that."

"It probably would be," he told her, "if we didn't use the Satellite for leaves for Base personnel and people from the asteroid stations. Down to about one-half-grav, the bad effects are hardly noticeable, and there are technical reasons why we'd prefer to have to maintain less spin on Satellite. But three-quarters is just about optimum for the short leaves: high enough to restore your peace of mind, and low enough to make it comparatively easy to readjust each time.

"We used to have less frequent longer leaves on Earth — usually a fifty per cent system, one month there, one here. We changed it originally so as to avoid having our LG people constantly exposed to high-grav in acceleration, as well as to save rocket space, and travel time, and things like that. Afterwards, we found out that we were getting much easier adjustments back to LG after the short leave at three-quarters, instead of the longer one on Earth."

"That makes sense," she said thoughtfully. "If you were picking the people who could take the low gravity best, they'd maybe have the most trouble with the acceleration."

"Yes and no. Strictly, physiologically, it tends to work that way; psychologically it's just the opposite, usually. And all this is in the pre-

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pared literature too." He smiled at her, and determinedly changed the subject. "Now what we've got to do is arrange for your physical. If it's all right with you, I'd like to get an appointment set up right away, for as soon as possible. Frankly, that's going to be your toughest hurdle here. If you get past that, I don't think we'll have too much more to worry about. But don't kid yourself that it's going to be easy."

"I'm pretty healthy, Colonel." She smiled comfortably. "My people were farmers, over there and over here; I think they call it 'peasant stock'? And I've been lucky. I always lived good."

"For fifty-two years," he reminded her gently. "That's not *old* — but forty is old in SpaServ. Remember, the whole reasoning behind this Project is that if we catch 'em young enough, we think we can train the kids to get along under no-grav conditions. And at your age, even acceleration can be a problem. Anyhow —"

He stood up, and she started gathering her coat and purse together. She was wonderful, he thought, almost unbelievable, after most of the others who came in here: a woman, no more, no less — a familiar, likable, motherly, competent, womanly kind of woman. When it came to psych tests (*if* it got that far, he had to remind himself, as he'd been trying to remind her), he knew she'd come up with every imaginable symptom and psychic disorder . . . in small, safe quantities. A little of this, and a little of that, and the whole adding up to the rare and "balanced" personality.

"Anyhow," he said, "there's no sense talking any more till after you see the Medics." He led her out to Helen's desk, got her appointment lined up, and made sure she was provided with duly informative literature. Then he saw her out, and went back to his desk, to plot.

The routine report he kept routine. That was no place to urge special allowances or special treatment. He mentioned the SpaServ connections, of course, but did not emphasize them. If the General read carefully, that would be enough. But he had to be *sure*.

He laid out his strategy with care, and found two items pending in his files that would serve his purpose: neither very urgent, either capable of assuming an appearance of immediate importance. Satisfied, he went out to lunch, and from there over to Henderson College to see the Dean again. He outlined to her his conversation with Ceil the day before—or at least some of it. The only part of that interview that concerned Sarah Lazarus was in connection with the young man at the Academy.

"When I thought it over," he explained, "it seemed to me it might cause some embarrassing questions all around if I were to approach the boy myself. I'm not in a position to say, 'Personal,' and not be asked any

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more. So I wondered if you . . .". He let it slide off, waiting to see what she'd offer.

"What was it exactly you wanted me to do?" she hedged.

"Write to him. That's all that would be necessary. They don't censor incoming mail there. Or if you'd rather not have anything down on the record, a phone call could do it."

She nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose . . ." she began slowly, then made up her mind. "Of course. I'll take care of it. What's the young man's name?"

"I'm afraid," he smiled, "we'll have to get Ceil's permission before I tell you that. I made some powerful promises yesterday."

"I know," she said, and he looked at her, startled. "Cecille came in to see me yesterday evening," she explained, enjoying her moment of superior knowledge. "She said she wanted to thank me for — for 'being so wonderful,' I think she said. I believe she *meant* for not tossing her out on her ear as soon as I had heard the *awful truth*."

"She comes from a — rather old-fashioned family?"

"That's one way of putting it. Her father is a very brilliant man in his line of work, I understand — something technical. He is also a boss-fearing, Hell-fearing, foreigner-fearing, bigoted, narrow-minded, one-sided, autocratic, petty, self-centered domestic tyrant. He spoils his wife and daughter with pleasure, as long as they abide by his principles — and his wife is a flexible, intelligent, family-loving woman who decided a long time ago that his principles had better be hers. Yes — I'd say it was an old-fashioned family. A fine family, if you stick to the rules."

He nodded. "That's about the way I figure it."

The Dean cleared her throat. "Anyhow, Cecille spent an hour or more with me last night, and after she got done telling me how wonderful *I* was, she started on what *really* interested her."

"She's already told you about him? Well, good. That makes it easier."

"No."

Again he was startled, but only for an instant. He knew what was coming now, and he had time to cover his responses. Her technique was still lousy — but maybe it worked on her students.

"No," she said. "The rest was all about *you*." She was watching him closely — of course. "I suppose," she asked thoughtfully, "that happens fairly often? A girl in trouble comes to see you, and finds you a sympathetic savior, and promptly decides she's in love?"

"Sometimes," he admitted. "I didn't think Ceil had quite reached that stage yet. I was even hoping she might avoid it."

"She didn't put it that way herself."

"It's annoying most of the time," he told her. "Sometimes, it's flatter-

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ing as all hell." He grinned, and refused further comment; when she laughed, he thought he detected a note of relief. He hoped he had said enough, and not too much.

"If you want to wait a minute," she said, "I'll get her up here now, and we can get this settled."

He glanced at his watch. "Fine!" And it was. Ceil came up, looked in horror from one to the other, and, as soon as she could breathe out again, asked, pleading: "*What's wrong?*"

His own laughter and the Dean's mingled, and when the girl had gone again, much relieved, the faint edge of doubt or suspicion between the man and the woman was gone too. He promised to get in touch with her as soon as he heard from the boy, and got back to his own office in plenty of time for the afternoon's carefully mapped campaign.

About 3:30, and for an hour afterwards, there was usually a lull in the General's afternoon. At 3:45, the Colonel went upstairs with his knotty-looking little problem, and got his expected sequence of responses: irritation at being bothered when no bother was looked for, followed by gratification at having so easily solved a really minor difficulty the Colonel had apparently been unable to untangle for himself.

"Takes the organizational mind, Tom," the General said jovially. "I guess you have to get older, though, before you begin to get the broad view most of the time. He took his 4 o'clock cigar from the humidor, and offered one to the Colonel.

"No thanks. I think I'll have to get older to appreciate those, too." He lit himself a cigarette, and held the lighter for the other man.

"You'll get there," the General puffed. "See you finally broke down," he added, grunting around the fat cigar. "Let one of those ladies get past you."

"I got tired of saying *no*. I'm afraid she won't get too far, though."

The General raised an inquiring eyebrow. "Haven't studied the report yet, but looked okay, quick glance." Fragrant smoke rolled over the words, and swallowed up some of them.

"She's not *young*," the Colonel said hesitantly. "I — well, frankly, I was making some allowance for the fact that her son and daughter are stationed in Satellite —"

"Oh? SpaServ?" He was interested now.

"The boy is. Five-year hitch, I think. I thought it might make her more likely to stick with us, if she lasts out one year."

"Tom, you got a positive *tal*ent —" The General even took the cigar out of his mouth to indulge himself in the lately rare luxury of using the faintly Southern-Western-homefolks manner that had done so much to put him where he was today. "— a *tal*ent, I tell you, for seein' things wrong-end hind-to."

Edgerly made the politely inquiring sound that was indicated.

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"Naturally, I mean, we want re-enlistments. But that's next year, and frankly, Tom, off the record, by the time we can get her up there and she's worked a year and had her four months' leave, you and me, we're going to be wearing the skin off our backsides someplace else *al*together. But don't get me wrong." He chuckled warmly, and re-inserted the cigar. "You wan' make 'lownces, you make 'em, *any* reason you want."

The Colonel stayed a few more minutes, till his cigarette was finished and he could politely leave. But on the way home, he stopped down in Medical, and dragged Bill Sawyer out with him for a drink.

It took two before Bill got around to it.

"That dame you called us on today — what's her name, Sorrento?"

"Serruto."

"Yeah. Did you put a bug in the Old Man's ear, or what?"

"Me? What kind of bug?"

"Oh, he was dropping gentle hints all over me this afternoon. Real gentle. One of them hit my toe, and I think the bone's broken. He thinks she ought to pass her Medic."

"She's not *young*," Edgerly said judiciously.

"No. But she's got a son in SpaServ, and after all, we *do* try to make some allowances, keep family together — hell, *you* know!"

The Colonel grinned. "What you need is a drink."

"You know, I never thought of that!" The doctor chuckled. "Hey! Remember that babe you were all steamed up about? Canadian. She'd lost her forearm . . .?"

"Yeah. Buonaventura. And I still don't see what damn difference sixteen inches of good honest plastic and wire instead of flesh and blood could make on the Moon."

"Regulations, son, regulations. That's what I was thinking about. Maybe if you could fix it for *her* to get a son into SpaServ . . ."

"About twenty years from now, you mean?"

"Well, she wasn't exactly a knockout, but she wouldn't be hard to take. Maybe I'd cooperate myself."

"Leave those little things to us bachelors," the Colonel said sternly. "No married man should have to sacrifice that way for the Service."

The waiter came with fresh drinks, and they concentrated on refreshing themselves for a short time. "Just the same," Edgerly said seriously, "I wish we could get more young ones like that. . . . I guess it's six of one and you-know-what of the other. The young ones wouldn't want to stay more than a year or maybe two . . . this Buonaventura gal, for instance. You know, her husband was killed in the same accident where she lost her arm. Honeymoon and all that. So she wanted to go be real busy for a while, till she could start thinking about another man. But any *young* woman who was healthy enough in the head to trust up there would just be putting in time, the same way . . ."

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"Okay, but these grandmas you're sending up aren't going to be able to take it more than one or two tours, anyhow," Sawyer put in.

"That's what I meant. You can't win."

"What you need," said the doctor, "is a drink."

"You know, that's an idea. . . ."

v

For a little while, there was the illusion that things were improving, all around. Tuesday, the same day Serruto was winding up her 38-hour session in Medic, there was a letter from one Adam Barton, asking if an appointment for the necessary examinations could be arranged sometime between November 27 and 30. Thanksgiving leave, the Colonel realized, and phoned down himself to set it up. They'd been trying to keep the weekend free for the staff, but this one would have to go through.

He managed to keep himself from asking about Mrs. Serruto; they wouldn't have a final answer till late afternoon. Then, on impulse, he phoned Sarah Lazarus, and asked her to have lunch with him.

"Celebration. Space Service owes you something," he explained.

"More than you know," she replied, but wouldn't say any more on the phone, except to suggest that in her own opinion she was entitled to a *good* lunch.

Over hor d'oeuvres, and remains of a ladylike Dubonnet, she explained: she had neither written nor telephoned to Barton-Bolido; she had gone to see him instead.

"When I thought it over, it seemed too awkward any other way," she said. "It's only about a three hour drive, and I understood they had visiting Sunday afternoon."

"We can reimburse you for the expense," the Colonel offered. "We have a special fund for that kind of thing. . . ."

"So do *we*," she said. "The expense was the least of it. If you could reimburse me for the — what do they call it — 'mental agony' . . .?"

"I take it you had something of a heart-to-heart talk?" He was very genuinely curious. "Is Ceil's impression of him anywhere near accurate?"

"*I* don't know what Ceil's impressions are," she said drily. "Which kind of evens the score, doesn't it?" She attacked a casserole of beef-burgundy sauté, with apparent uninterest in continuing the conversation.

"All right," he laughed. "I surrender. One betrayal deserves another. *He* wouldn't be very likely to talk to *me*, you know." He told her what the girl had said, and she nodded.

"That's about it — except he happens to be crazy about her, so this bit of news has really got him in a tizzy. He'd managed to 'forget'

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about her, he said, since the summer — convincing himself that it was best to let the whole thing drop — don't see her any more, don't write — *you* know? And it makes sense. He does have his handsome little heart set on SpaServ — see, I'm learning the lingo? I'll have the pastry," she told the waiter, with no change of tone or tempo. "Anyhow, he can't marry for the next two years, till he graduates. And after that, there's a four-year . . . hitch?"

He nodded soberly.

"Hitch, before he can even *hope* to get permission to have his family with him, wherever he is — provided it's some place where he can *have* a family."

"It will be," he told her. "Policy is shaping up that way. They're encouraging wives to go up Satellite now, and any station with enough gravs for moderate good health will be opened for families as fast as possible. The boys seem to last longer that way, and work better."

She was interested. He would have liked to hear more about Charles, but that was personal curiosity, which would in any case be satisfied later on. There was more urgent business for this luncheon, and it was already getting late. He answered her questions, more or less completely but always with a direction in mind, and eventually they came round to the Foster Parent problem.

"I'm sweating one out today," he told her. "Maybe that's why I decided to use you as an excuse for a good lunch. It's not easy to find the right people, and half the time, when I do get someone I'm satisfied with, she can't get past the Medics. Stands to reason: the kind I want are likely to have led pretty busy lives, and mostly they run to older women — *old*, that is, in SpaServ terms — forty and fifty. The one I'm waiting to hear about is fifty-two. If her heart will stand up to blastoff acceleration, she *may* make it. But you never know what kind of ruination those boys can pull out of their infernal machines."

"What you need is a good old-fashioned diagnostician," she said, laughing. "The kind that looked you over and told you in five minutes what was wrong — and turned out to be right."

He shook his head sadly. "We're not even allowed to do *that* in psych clinics any more. If you can't tab it up on IBM or McBride cards, it just ain't so." He sipped at his coffee, which was cold, but — by design — not yet empty. "I'll tell you what we *do* need, though," he said seriously.

"What?"

"More Foster Parents."

She gave him that studying-look again. "Just what is it you're trying to tell me, Colonel?"

"Nothing at all," he said steadily, returning her look. "Just chit-chat over lunch. I *did* have a notion about how to publicize our problem in the quarters where it might do the most good: educators, social

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workers, people like that. But I haven't been able to get official authorization for it yet, so . . ."

Deliberately, he paused and sipped again at the cold coffee. ". . . so naturally, this is all just idle talk. I'm not *trying* to tell you anything; I'm just answering your questions."

She was sipping her own coffee when he tried to get a look at her face. When he dropped her off at the College, she hadn't revealed any reaction. They said a friendly goodby, and he thanked her again for her efforts with the young man, then drove back fast. It was mid-afternoon already, and the report on Mrs. Serruto —

The report was on his desk when he got back. He read it through, and sank back in his chair to find out what it felt like to relax.

The General had given him till October 9 to find a satisfactory FP. Today was the seventh.

He swiveled his chair around to look out the window, at the wide sweep of the mountain range, the dark shapes, green-blue and purple, pushing up into the pale-blue sky of the mesa country. Life was good. For some minutes, he did nothing at all but fill his vision with color and form, and allow his excellent lunch to be digested. Finally he turned back to the desk and riffled through papers in the *Hold* basket till he found the Schedule that had come with the General's last Memo.

Mrs. Serruto would be ready for the rocket on December 9. They didn't have to have another one till January 6. After that, one on each biweekly shipment, at least through February.

January 6, less two months' training, left him 30 days. Serruto had been blind luck; he couldn't count on that again. He buzzed Helen, and dictated a brief Memo for the General, asking for a conference, soon, on his proposals about publicity. Halfway through, the phone rang in the outer office. He picked it up on his desk, and it was Sarah Lazarus.

God is on my side he thought. He had hardly expected to hear from her so soon, after her stubbornly noncommittal silence during lunch.

She had enjoyed the luncheon, she said, and wanted to thank him again.

"You earned it," he told her. "Besides which, the pleasure was at least half mine." *Or will be, when you get around to what's on your mind. . . .*

"The other thing I wanted to ask you about," she said, "was whether Thanksgiving weekend would be all right for our girl's visit?"

Not with the Medics it wouldn't, but he assured her it would. They had the boy coming in that Friday anyhow. The Colonel mentally apologized to God for his presumption.

"You said five days, I think?"

"Fi — oh, for the . . . *visit*. Yes. She ought to be here two days ahead of time, and then it's usually best to

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wait at least two days afterwards."

"Well — maybe she'd better come in at the beginning of the week. That will give her a chance to get dramatically ill in class. And it will work out better when I tell her parents, I think."

"Any way you want it," he assured her. "It's far enough ahead so the schedule's pretty open. Especially with our present curtailments . . ." He waited.

"Oh, yes," she said. "That's right. I'd forgotten." Then, very sweetly, she asked him if he would care to come to dinner at her home on Saturday evening.

It's your deal, lady, he thought; all he could do was pick up the cards and play them as they came.

"Cocktails start at six," she said, and gave him an address. He hung up, trying to remember whether he had ever heard any reference to a *Mr.* Lazarus. That cocktail-chatter sounded like a big party, but her tone of voice didn't. He shrugged, and turned back to his secretary, who was waiting with an inevitable expression of intelligent detachment.

"Make a note, Sergeant. Remind me to buy a black tie. I'm in the social whirl now."

She made the note, too. Nothing he could do now would save him from being reminded. He favored the Perfect Lady Soldier with a look of mingled awe, horror, and affection, and got on with the business of dictating his reminder to the General. . . .

Brigadier General Harlan Foley Martin, U.N.S.S., resplendent in full uniform, with the blazing-sun insigne of SpaServ shining on his cap, was conducting a party of visitors through his personal domain: the newest, cleanest, finest building in the entire twenty-seven acres that made up the North American Moon Base Supply Depot — which was beyond doubt the biggest, cleanest, fastest and generally bestest Depot anywhere on Earth.

It was of particular importance that these (self-evident) facts should be brought to the attention of the visitors, against the time when they returned to their respective Depots in South Africa, North Asia, and Australia, to establish similar centers in which to carry out their share of the important and inspiring work of Project Nursemaid.

Half a dozen duly humble seekers after knowledge followed at his heels (metaphorically speaking; in actual practice, the General politely ushered them ahead of him through doors and narrow passageways), drinking in wisdom, observing efficiency, and uttering appropriate expressions of admiration.

The General felt it was time for a bit of informality, and there was no better way than in a display of that indifference to rank and protocol for which the Normerican Section was famous. Accordingly, he headed straight for the office of his Psychological Aide, Colonel Edgerly. There were times when it was possi-

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ble to place a good deal of faith in the Colonel's judgment and behavior.

Edgerly rose to the occasion. He showed them through his Department, explained the psych-testing equipment in three languages, and excused himself from accompanying them further on account of the press of his own work.

In the waiting room, as they took leave of the Colonel, the General drew the attention of the visiting gentlemen away from the admirable example of Normerican soldiery behind the reception desk with a typical display of typical Normerican informality.

"Oh, by the way, Tom, before I forget it — I've been too busy the last day or two, but I saw your Memo on that idea of yours, and I want the two of us to get together some time and talk it over. Some time *soon* . . ." He smiled, and the Colonel smiled back.

"Well, let's set up a date now." Edgerly turned to the Sergeant behind the desk.

"Oh, no need for that, Tom. Just give me a ring, or I'll drop in on you. Any time, any time at all. . . ."

The General and his party proceeded to examine the hospital facilities on a lower floor.

Colonel Edgerly reknotted his tie, adjusted the angle of his cap, and stepped out of his car in front of one of the city's better apartment houses. A doorman led him to the proper elevator, and pushed the appropriate button for him. He stepped out into a foyer done in walnut wood and cream-colored plaster. As the elevator door closed, a chime rang softly in a room behind the floral-printed draperies, and he had hardly time to savor the nostalgia the decor had produced before his hostess pulled the drapes aside and asked him in.

She was wearing a black dinner dress that displayed, among other things, a rather different personality from the one she wore in her office. However, there *was* a Mr. Lazarus, and five or six other guests besides.

They drank cocktails and engaged in party conversation until one more couple arrived. The dinner was well-cooked and well-served, and eaten to the accompaniment of some remarkably civilized table talk, plus an excellent wine and subdued background music. Afterwards, three more couples came in, and by the time the last of them arrived, the Colonel's opinion of his hostess — already improved by her home, her dress, her food and drink — had reached a peak of admiration and appreciation. Out of thirteen persons present that evening, every one except three escorting husbands — *every* other one was an upper-echelon executive of some social service agency, woman's club, child care organization, or adult educational center.

The Colonel did not proselytize, nor did he mention any special difficulties the Project was having. There

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was no need to do either. The guests that evening had come specifically to meet him, because they were curious and interested and felt themselves inadequately informed about Project Nursemaid. He had nothing to do but answer eager intelligent questions put to him by alert and understanding people — and in the course of answering, it took no more than an occasional shift of emphasis to convey quite clearly that the Project's capacity for handling PN's must necessarily depend in large part on its success in finding satisfactory Foster Parents.

"Did you say before that you preferred older women for these jobs, Colonel?" He looked around for the questioner: a slim tailored woman with a fine-drawn face and clean clear skin; she looked as though she belonged on a country estate with dogs and horses and a prize-winning garden. For the moment, he couldn't remember her name, or which outfit she was connected with.

"No. Not at all. If I mentioned anything like that, it should have been by way of complaint. The fact is that most of the people who satisfy our other requirements *are* older women — older in SpaServ terms, anyhow. Most of our candidates are, for that matter. Women under the age of forty, if they're healthy well-balanced personalities, are either busy raising their own families, or else they're even busier looking for the right man to get started with. From the Medical viewpoint, we'd a lot rather get younger people. And for that matter, I think they might suit our purposes better all around — the right kind, that is."

"I see. I was particularly interested, because we've been doing some intensive work lately on the problem of jobs for women over thirty-five, and I thought if we knew just what you wanted . . . ?" She let it drift off into a pleasant white-toothed smile, one feathery eyebrow barely raised to indicate the question-mark at the end. He remembered now — Jane Somebody, from Aptitudes, Inc., the commercial guidance outfit. He struggled for the last name.

"I think Miss Sommers has a good point there, Colonel." This was the dumpy little woman with the bright black eyes, sitting on the hassock across from him. *Sommers, that's right! Next time I'll put Sergeant Gregory in my pocket to take notes.* "I hate to pester you so much on your night out, but I think several of us here might be able to send you people occasionally, if we knew a little more about just what you want."

This one he remembered: she was the director of the Beth Shalom Family Counseling Service. "Believe me, Mrs. Goldman, I can't think of any way I'd rather be pestered. I just wish I'd known beforehand what I was getting into. I'd have come prepared with a mimeographed list of requirements to hand out at the door." With complete

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irrelevance, the thought flashed through his mind that the Sergeant never *had* reminded him about that black tie. *You're slipping, old girl!* he thought, and smiled at Mrs. Goldman. "As it is — well, it takes about a week to complete the testing of an applicant. If I tried to tell you in detail what we want, Mrs. Lazarus might get tired of our company after a while. I think you probably know in general what personality types are suitable for that kind of work. Beyond that, probably it would work better for you to ask any specific questions you have in mind, and let me try to answer them."

"Well, I *was* wondering — are you only taking women, or are you interested in men too? There's one couple I had in mind; they're young and healthy and what psychological problems they've got are all centered on the fact that they can't have any kids of their own, and because he's a free-lance artist with no steady income, they can't adopt one. I think they might like to go, for a year or two . . . ?"

There was no point in telling her that the chances were a thousand to one they'd never pass the psychs. Nobody had ever proved that most cases of sterility were psychogenic, but the Project had, so far, built up some fascinating correlations between certain types of sexual fears and childlessness; and then the "free-lance artist" . . . He satisfied himself with answering the question she'd asked, and the other important one implied in her last sentence.

"We'd be delighted to have couples, if we can get them. We haven't taken any men so far, but we've got a couple on our reserve list. We want them later on, but for the immediate future, we need women in the nursery. One other point, though . . . what you said about 'a year or two.'

"We're signing people up for one-year contracts. One year's duty, and four months' leave, that is. We're doing it that way for several reasons: we want to be able to retest everyone medically before we renew contracts; and we want to check actual records of behavior on duty and psychosomatic responses against our psych tests. A few other things, too, but all of 'em boil down to the fact that we *think* we know what we're doing, but we're not sure yet. However —

"If it weren't for the special problems of LGT, we'd — well, obviously, if it weren't for those problems, the Project wouldn't be necessary at all — but since it is necessary, we're still hampered by the same limitations. We'd like to provide permanent Foster Parents for each group of children. We can't do that, for the same reason we can't just send whole families up there: the adults can't take it that long. Even with the present leave system, five years is probably going to be the maximum — five years duty, that is, with four month intervals on Earth between each tour.

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"Right at this point, we're just not in a position to insist that anyone who goes should agree to put in the maximum number of tours — I mean whatever maximum the Medics decide on for the individual person. We can't do it, because it's more important just to get people *up* there. But we would if we could."

He broke off, uncomfortably aware that he was monopolizing the floor. "I'm sorry. I seem to be making a speech. . . ."

"Well, go ahead and make it," Mrs. Lazarus said easily. "It's a pretty good one."

"I'm just letting off steam," he laughed. "This is my pet frustration. Right now, the Project, or our division, has the specific job of supplying personnel, and we're not supposed to worry about the continuation of the Project five or ten years from now. But I'm the guy who's supposed to pick the right people to do the job — and I *can't* pick them without thinking in terms of what will happen to those kids when they're five years old and fifteen and twenty."

"I think I understand your difficulty a little bit, Colonel." It was a quiet, very young-sounding voice from across the room. "We have something of the same problem to face." He picked her out now: the nun, Mother Mary Paul. One of the orders specializing in social work; Martha . . . ? Yes: Order of Martha of Bethany. "Some of the children who come to us are orphans; others are from homes temporarily unable to care for them; some are day students; some are students who live in the convent. Most of them, in one way or another, are from homes where they have not received — well, quite as much as one might hope a happy home could provide. We want to give them the *feeling* of having a home with us — and yet, we know that most of them will be leaving us and going to their own families, or adopted families, or other schools. It's — rather a harder job, I think, to give a small child a sense of security and of *belonging*, when you know yourself that the time will come when the child must be handed over to someone else's care. I know I tend to demand a good deal more of the sisters going into orphanage work than of a family qualifying for adoption."

"You've said that better than I could have —" What were you supposed to call her? Not *Sister;* he gathered she was too high up in her order. *Mother? Your Reverence?* He compromised by omitting any title, and hoped the omission was not an offense. "About the sense of belonging. Ideally, of course, the children should be in families, with permanent adoptive parents. But we have to juggle the needs of the children against the limitations of the adults. The kids need permanence; but the grownups just can't last long enough under the conditions. So to even up the books, an FP, Foster Parent, has to be something pretty

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special: a mature woman with the health of a young girl — a sane and balanced personality just sufficiently off keel to want to go to the Moon — someone with the devotion of a nun, who has no very pronounced doctrinal beliefs . . . . I could go on and on like that, but what it all comes down to is that the kind of people we want are useful and productive right here on Earth, and mostly much too busy to think about chasing off to the Moon."

There was a general laugh, and people started moving about, shifting groups, debating the wisdom of one more drink. The Colonel debated not at all. He took a refill happily, and turned away from the bar to find himself being converged upon. Mrs. Goldman, Mother Mary Paul, and a Dr. Jonas Lutwidge, pastor of the local Episcopal Church, and a big wheel of some kind in the city's interdenominational social welfare organization.

They did not exactly all speak at once, but the effect was the same: What, they wanted to know, had he meant by "no pronounced doctrinal beliefs?"

The Colonel drank deeply, and began explaining, grateful that this had come up, if it had to, in a small group, and equally glad that he had thoughtfully provided himself with a double shot of whisky in this glass.

The broad view first: ". . . you realize that there will be, altogether, one thousand babies involved in this Project. Two hundred of them will come through our Depot. The rest will be from every part of the world, from every nationality, every faith, every possible variation of political and social background. The men and women who care for them, and who educate them, will not necessarily be from the same backgrounds at all. . . ." And world government being still new, and human beings still very much creatures of habit and custom, there was no guarantee that bias and discrimination could be ruled out in the Project except by the one simple device that would make anything of the sort *impossible*.

From the individual viewpoint: "These kids are going to grow up in an environment almost entirely alien, from the Earth viewpoint. They'll spend their time half on Moon Base, and half on the no-grav training ship. They won't have parents, in the sense in which we use the term, or families, or relatives — or any of the other factors that go to forming the human personality. Maybe we could grow us a thousand supermen this way, but frankly we don't want to find out. We might not *like* them; they might even not like *us*. . . ." Therefore every effort was going to be made to provide a maximum of artificial "family" life. The babies would be assigned, shortly after birth, to a group of five "brothers and sisters"; Foster Parents in the group would necessarily change from time to time, but whenever a contract was renewed, the parent would go back

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to the same group. There would be a common group-designation, to be used as a last name; even first names were to be given by the first FP to assume the care of each baby. "It's all part of what you were saying before, Mother," he pointed out. "We want the Foster Parents to *feel and act* as much as possible as if these were their own children; unfortunately, the physical setup is such that the opportunities to create such situations are few enough. We have to use every device we can."

Obviously, under these circumstances, religious training could not be given in accordance with the child's ancestry. The solution finally decided upon had been to invite all religious groups to select representatives to participate in the children's education. They would all be exposed to every form of religious belief, and could choose among them. A compromise at best — and one that could work only by a careful system of checks and balances, and by making certain, insofar as possible, that the proselytizing was done *only* by the official representatives, and not by evangelical Foster Parents.

Mother Mary Paul and Mrs. Goldman both seemed tentatively satisfied with the explanation. Dr. Lutwidge was inclined to argue, but Sarah Lazarus came to the Colonel's rescue with a polite offer of coffee which drew their attention to the noticeable absence of the other guests.

It was almost 1 o'clock when Edgerly got home, in a glow of pleased excitement, and in no mood for bed. He stalked through the four rooms of his bachelor cottage, surveying everything with profound distaste, and sat up for an hour more, making sketches and notes about the improvements he meant to effect. Next morning, on his way to work, he stopped at a florist's for the brown jug and yellow roses that he had felt, all evening, should have been on the table in that foyer. Briefly, he debated drawing on the Special Account to cover the cost, and decided against it; he had made his gesture now toward Better Living, and could leave his own home alone.

Within a week, the number of FP applicants in his office began to increase; within three weeks, he had another successful candidate. His working day, which had for a short time been quiet and peaceful, resumed its normal place, an hour or two behind schedule. And if the General still had failed to authorize the publicity campaign which the Colonel had already *unofficially* initiated, at least the Old Man had done nothing to impede it, and was showing a remarkable tendency to stay entirely out of the Psych Dept.'s hair.

This was good, up to a point. But by the middle of November, when the first rush of applicants referred by the Dean's friends had begun to diminish and he had found only one more acceptable candidate, the Colo-

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nel began to feel the need of an official authorization that would make it possible to carry his campaign farther abroad. The people he'd met were all local; some had state-wide influence, others only in the immediate area. The Depot represented a territory that covered all of what had once been Canada, Alaska, and the U. S. A., plus part of Mexico.

The Colonel chafed a while, then sent another Memo, asking for a conference on his suggestions of five weeks ago. For some days afterwards, he watched and waited for a response. Then another satisfactory applicant turned up, and he was busy with psych-tests and briefing interviews for the better part of a week. He checked off the second January rocket on his schedule, and offered up a brief prayer to whatever Deity had been looking out for him, that another such woman should come his way before the third of December.

And then it was Thanksgiving week.

VI

Monday afternoon, Ceil Chanute was admitted to the Project infirmary. Tuesday morning, Dean Lazarus called to report that she had informed the girl's family of her illness, and had successfully headed off any efforts at coming out to visit her. Wednesday morning, the day her operation was scheduled, the Colonel came in early and had breakfast with Ceil in the Med staff room. He saw no reason to tell her that this was standard practice whenever possible, and when he went upstairs he was basking in the glow of her evident pleasure at what she thought a special attention.

He spent most of the morning dealing swiftly and efficiently with correspondence; the only time he hesitated was over one handwritten letter, from a town a hundred miles away. This he reread carefully, then slid it into his pocket, to handle personally later on.

At 4:30 that afternoon Ruth Mackintosh came in. She was the most recent of his successful candidates, now in her first week of regular training, and part of the process was a daily hour in his office, mostly to talk over any problems or questions of hers — partly to allow him continuous observation of her progress and her attitudes.

At five-oh-four the Sergeant, out at the desk, buzzed him with the news that the operation on the Chanute girl was completed, without complications, and she would be coming out of anesthesia shortly. The Colonel repeated the news for his visitor's benefit, explaining that he might have to leave in a hurry, if Ceil began to wake up.

"Oh, of course — maybe you'd rather go down now?"

He would. For some idiotic reason, he said instead: "It'll be ten or fifteen minutes anyhow."

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"I wish I'd known," she said. "I was going to ask you if I could see an operation before I went up?"

That was a new one. "Have you ever watched an operation before?"

"Well, I used to be a practical nurse; I've seen plenty of home deliveries, and I saw a Caesarian done once — oh, you mean, will it upset me? No." She laughed. "I don't think so."

That wasn't what he'd meant. "Why do you want to see it?" he asked slowly. With some people the best way to get an answer was to ask a direct question.

"I don't know — I just want to see as much as I can, know as much as I can about the babies and what's happened to them already, and where they come from, and — if you people weren't so obviously oriented in the opposite direction, I'd want to meet the mothers, too, as many as I could."

Wonderful — if true. He scribbled a note to check over certain of her tests for repressed sadistic leanings, and told her: "We're not oriented the other way *entirely*. In fact, we've changed our feeling about that several times already. Just now, I don't think it would be possible for you to meet any of the parents, but I think we can manage a pass to see a Section performed. I'll check."

He reached for the phone, but it buzzed before he could get to it. He listened, and turned back to Mrs. Mackintosh.

"I'm afraid I am going to have to run out on you." He stood up. "The kid downstairs is coming out of it now — you understand?"

"Of course." She stood up, and followed him to the door. "Do you want me to wait, or . . . ?"

"If you'd like to. Check with Sergeant Gregory here. She'll give you all the dope about getting that pass. And if you want to wait, that's fine, unless the Sergeant says I'm going to be busy. She knows better than I do." He wanted to get out the other door and downstairs. The feeling of urgency was unreasonable, but it was there. "Helen," he said briskly, "you get things worked out with Mrs. Mackintosh. I'll be downstairs if you want me. Sorry to rush off like this," he told the other woman again. "Helen'll set up another appointment for us. Or wait if you want." *That's the* third *time I said that*, he thought irritably, and stopped trying to make sense, or to say anything at all.

He had the satisfaction, at least, as he went out the door, of one quick glimpse of the Perfect Lady Soldier, out of control. Helen was flabbergasted . . . and it showed.

Waiting for the elevator, he wondered what she thought. Going down in the elevator, he was sure he knew. And striding down the corridor on the hospital floor, he was dismayed to consider that she might possibly be right.

He had some news for Ceil Chanute, tucked away in his jacket

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pocket — news he had withheld all morning, uncertain what effect it might have on her, and therefore unwilling to deliver it before the operation. True enough, he ought to be on hand when she woke up; it *might* be what she'd want to hear. True, but *not* true *enough* — not enough to warrant his indecent haste.

He made himself slow down before he reached the nurse's cubicle outside the Infirmary. When he went inside, he had already made up his mind that his concern about his own behavior was ridiculous anyhow. An occasional extra show of interest in an individual case — *any* case — was *not* necessarily the same thing as an unprofessional personal involvement.

Not *necessarily*, echoed a sneaky, cynical voice in the back of his mind.

He reached the bed, and abandoned introspection. She was awake, not yet entirely clear-minded, but fully conscious. He sat down on the chair right next to her head, and picked up her limp hand.

"How's the girl?"

"I'll live." She managed a sort of a smile.

"Feeling bad?"

"All right . . ."

"Hungry?"

She shook her head.

"Thirsty?" She hesitated, then nodded. "Water? Tea? Lemonade? Ginger ale?" She just smiled, fuzzily. The nurse, standing at the foot of the bed, looked to him for decision. "Tea," he said, but the girl shook her head. "Something cold," she murmured.

The nurse went away, and the Colonel leaned back in the chair, to an angle where he could watch her face without making her uncomfortably aware of it. "I've got some news for you," he said.

She turned her head to look at him, suddenly worried.

"Take it easy, kid. If it was anything bad, I wouldn't tell you *now*. Just that you'll have some company tonight — *if* you want to."

"Company . . . ?" Her eyes went wide, and she seemed to come out of the postoperative daze entirely. "*Not my mother!*"

"Nope. Gentleman who gave his name as Adam Barton."

It took her a moment to connect; then she gasped, and said uneasily, "How did he know —? But how could he get here *tonight?* Isn't he at school? How —"

"One at a time. He's coming for his physical on Friday. I guess Dean Lazarus told him you were being operated on today. I had a note from him this morning." He took it out of his pocket, and held it out, but she shook her head in vigorous refusal. "Look, kid: he's leaving there at five this evening; left already. He'll be here about eight, and he's going to phone when he gets in. He'd like to see you."

She didn't say anything, but he could see the frowning intensity of her face. "Do you want to see

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him, Ceil? It's up to you, you know. I thought — in case you wanted to, you might like to know about it right away, when you woke up. But . . ."

"*No!*"

"Whatever you want, gal. I wouldn't decide right away, if I were you. He'll phone when he gets in. I'll tell the nurse to check with you then."

"No," she said again, less violently, but just as certainly. "No. She doesn't have to ask me. Just tell him no."

"Okay. If you change your mind, tell her before eight. Otherwise, she'll tell him *no*, just like the lady said. Here's your drink." He took the cold glass from the nurse's hand, and put it on the table. "Can you sit up?" She tried. "Here." He lifted her head, cradling her shoulders in his arm, and helped her steady the glass with his other hand. It didn't feel like anything special. She was female, which was nice, and well-shaped, which was better. Otherwise, he couldn't find any signs of great emotion or excitement in himself. He eased her down gently, and stood up.

"I'll be around till 6 if you want me," he said. "Anything you get a yen for, tell the nurse. If she can't fix you up, she'll call Colonel Edgerly, of the Special Services Dept. We aim to please. The patient is always right. If you want to get sat up some more, you can use the nurse; but it's more fun if I do it."

She giggled weakly, and the nurse produced a tolerant smile. Out in the hall, he left instructions about the phone call. "She may change her mind," he finished. "Nobody says *No* that hard unless they want to say *Yes* at the same time. Let me know if she has any sudden change of mood — up *or* down. I'll be at my home phone all evening, if you want me — or if she does."

Going back in the elevator, he didn't worry about his own emotions; he pondered instead on what "Adam Barton's" must be.

She lay flat on her back in the neat hard white bed, and felt nothing at all. Delicately, she probed inside herself, but there was no grief and no gladness; not even anger; not even love. It was all over, and here she was, and that was that. After a while, she'd be getting up out of the bed, and everything would be just the same as before.

No. Not quite everything. They had taken out more than the — the baby. She thought the words, thought them *as* words. *Baby*. They had taken out more than that, though. Whatever it was Charlie had meant, that was gone too. Out. Amputated. Cut away.

She couldn't see him, because he would be a stranger. She didn't know him. She wouldn't know what to say to him, or how to talk. What had happened long ago had happened to a different girl, and to some man she didn't know.

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Adam Barton!

Her hand came down hard on the mattress, and jarred her, so that she became aware of pain. That was a relief. At least she could feel *something*. She saw the clenched fist of the hand, and was astonished: it hadn't *fallen* on the bed; she'd *hit* the mattress with her fist!

Why?

She couldn't remember what she was thinking about when she did it. The pain in her pelvis was more noticeable now, too, and no longer something to be grateful for.

She didn't remember calling the nurse, but somebody in a white uniform handed her a pill, and lifted her head so she could sip some water.

He was right. It was more fun when *he* did it. She wished he would come back. She wanted him to stroke her head, the way her daddy used to do when she was very little, and then she was waking up, and very hungry.

The nurse came in right away; she must have been watching through the glass wall at the end of the room. But when she brought the tray, there was nothing on it except some junket and a glass of milk. When she insisted she was still hungry, the nurse agreed doubtfully to some orange juice. Then she lay there with nothing to do but dream about a full meal, and try to sort out memories: The terrible moment when they put the cone over her face in the operating room — the dazed first wakening — the Colonel . . .

"Nurse!"

The white uniform popped through the door.

"What time is it?"

"Seven twenty-four."

"Oh. Is — Colonel Edgerly wouldn't be here now, would he?"

"No. But he left word for us to call if you wanted him."

"Oh, no. It's not important. It can wait." It *wasn't* important; it wasn't even *any*thing. It was just — just wanting to know if he was there. No, it wasn't, because she felt better now. It was wanting to know he hadn't *forgotten* about her. *Well, he didn't!* she scolded herself happily. He wouldn't, either. He wasn't the kind of man who took on responsibilities and then walked out on them, like . . .

Like I *did*, she thought suddenly.

The telephone out in the nurse's room was ringing. It cut off half-way through the second ring. She listened, but you couldn't hear the nurse's voice through the wall. He could be calling to find out how she was. Or her father — if her *father* knew . . .

She giggled, because her father would bawl her out for daydreaming and "woolgathering." That's what he called it when he talked to her, but she'd heard him telling her mother once, when he didn't know she could hear, "Mental masturbation, that's all it is! Poking around inside herself till she wears herself out. There's no satisfaction in it, and all it does is make you want more of the same. Plenty of good men, men

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with *ability*, starving to death right now because they couldn't stop themselves from doing just that." It was funny how she remembered the words, and just the way he'd said them; it was years and years ago, and she'd hardly understood it at the time. "If that girl spent half the time thinking about *what she's doing* that she does worrying about what she already did and dreaming about what she's going to do," he'd finished indignantly, "then *I* wouldn't worry about her at all!"

He was right, she thought tiredly, and a moment later she thought it again, more so, because she remembered that it was Charlie who had called. She should have talked to him; she could have done that much, at least. She'd been lying here thinking he was the kind of person who walked out on his responsibilities, and that wasn't fair, because she didn't know what he would have done if she'd told him.

Well, why didn't *I tell him?* she wondered, and . . .

Stop it! she told herself. *If you have a toothache, you won't make it better by worrying it with your tongue all the time.*

Her father had said *that*, too, she remembered, and suddenly she was furious. *That's not what I was doing*, she told him coldly, but she didn't try to explain, not to him. Only there was a difference. She wasn't just worry-warting or daydreaming now; she was trying to find out *why* — a lot of *why's*.

That was the way *he* thought, all the time: *Why?* It was thinking that way that made him the kind of person he was. . . .

She giggled again. Every time she thought about him, she thought *he*, and never a name. *Colonel* didn't fit at all, and *Mister* wasn't right, and just plain *Edgerly* was silly, and she didn't dare think *Tom.*

The nurse came to give her a pill.

"Is that to make me go to sleep?" she asked warily.

"It's a sedative," the nurse said, as if that was different.

"I slept all day," she said. "Will it bother anybody if I read a while?" She didn't want to read, especially, but she didn't want to sleep yet either. The nurse handed her the pill, and held out the water, and obediently, because she didn't know how to argue about it, she lifted her head and swallowed twice. When she moved like that, she remembered what it was she was trying so hard not to think about. It didn't hurt so much any more, but there was a kind of *empty-ache.*

The nurse turned on her bed light, and got some magazines from the table across the room. "If you want anything, the bell's in back of you," she said.

Ceil let her hand be guided to the button, but there was something she wanted right now. "Was it —" she started, and tried again. "What was it?"

"It's a boy," the nurse said, and laughed. "Or anyhow, it *will* be,

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we think. You can't always tell for sure so soon."

Is . . . will be . . .

Her head was swimming, from the pill probably.

Not *was. Will be.*

It's alive, she thought. *I didn't kill it.* She smiled, and sank back into the pillow, but when she woke up she was crying, and she couldn't stop.

VII

The phone woke him at 3:43, according to the luminous figures on the dark clock-face. By the same reckoning, he had had exactly one hour and 58 minutes of sleep. It was not enough.

He drove down to the Depot at a steady 35, not trusting his fuzzy reflexes for anything faster; he made up for it by ignoring stop signs and traffic signals all along the way. The streets were empty and silent in the darkest hour of a moonless night; in the clear mountain air, the rare approach of another set of headlights was visible a mile or more away. He drove with the window down and his sports shirt opened at the neck, and by the time he got there he was wide awake.

They had taken her out of the infirmary into one of the consultation rooms, where the noise would not disturb the other woman who was waiting for an operation the next day. She was sobbing uncontrollably, huddled under a blanket on the couch, her shoulders trembling and shaking, her face turned to the wall, her fingers digging into the fabric that covered the mattress.

He didn't try to stop her. He sat on the edge of the couch, and put a hand on her shoulder. She moved just enough to throw it off. He waited a moment, and rested the same hand on her head. This time there was a hesitation, a feeling of preparation for movement again, and then she stayed still and went on crying.

After a little while he began stroking her head, very softly, very slowly. There was no visible or audible reaction, yet he felt she wanted him to continue. He couldn't see his watch. The dial was turned down on the arm that was stroking the girl's hair, but he thought it must have been a long time. He began to feel overwhelmingly sleepy. The sensible thing would have been to lie down next to her, and take her in his arms, and both of them get some sleep. . . .

No, not sensible. Sensible was what it wouldn't be. What it *would* be was pleasant and very reasonable — but only within the limits of a two-person system of logic. From the point of view of the Depot, the General, the nurse, the Space Service's honor, and the civilized world in general, it would be an unpardonable thing to do. *If I were in uniform*, he thought sharply, *it would never have occurred to me!*

She hadn't quite stopped crying

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yet, but she was trying to say something; the words got lost through the sobs and the blanket, but he knew what they would be. Apologies, embarrassment, explanations. He stood up, opened the door, called down the corridor for the nurse, and asked for some coffee.

She nodded.

If I were in uniform, she'd have said, "Yes, sir!" clickety, clack.

When he turned back, Ceil was sitting up on the couch, the blanket wrapped around her, covering everything but her face, which was a classical study in tragicomedy: tear-stained and grief-worn, red-nosed and self-consciously ashamed.

"I — I'm sorry. I don't know what — I don't *know* what was the matter."

He shrugged. "It happens." When the coffee came, he could try to talk to her some, or get her to talk. Now he was just tired.

"They woke you up, didn't they?" She had just noticed the sports shirt and slacks; she was looking at him with real interest. "You look different that way. N —" She cut it off short.

"Nicer?" he finished for her. "How do? My name is Tom. I just work here."

"I'm sorry I made you get out of bed," she said stiffly.

No you're not. You feel pleased and important and self-satisfied. He shrugged. "Too much sleep would make me fat."

"What time is it?"

He looked at his watch. "Ten to five." The nurse came in with a tray. "Time for breakfast. Pour some for me, will you? I'll be right back."

He followed the nurse down the corridor, out of earshot of the open door. "Did the kid call last night — Barton?"

"Not since I've been on; that was midnight."

He walked back to the little cubicle with her and found the neat notation in the phone log at 2003 hours, with a telephone number and extension next to the name. He turned to the nurse, changed his mind, and picked up the phone himself. There was a distinct and vengeful satisfaction in every twirl of the dial; and a further petty pleasure when the sleepy, resentful voice at the other end began to struggle for wakefulness and a semblance of military propriety as soon as he said the word "Colonel."

"I'm not certain," he said briskly, "but if you get out here fast, Ceil just might want to see you this morning."

"Yes, sir."

"You have a car?"

"Yes, sir, I dr —"

"Well, it should be about twenty minutes from where you are. Come to the main gate at the Depot. You have any identification, *Mister Barton?*"

"I . . . no, sir. I didn't think about . . ."

"All right. Use your driver's license."

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"But that has my own na —"

"Yeah, I know. You're permitted civvies on leave, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. You ask for me. Personal visit. I'll leave word at the gate where they can find me. You know how to get out here?"

"I think so. Sir."

"Well, let's make sure." He gave careful instructions, waited for the boy to repeat them, and added a final reminder: "You'll only need identification to get in the main gate. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The Colonel hung up and picked up the other phone, the inside system. He left word at the gate that he was expecting a visitor, and could be found in the Infirmary. Then he went quickly back to the little room where Ceil waited, before the creeping dark edge of a critical conscience could quite eclipse the savage glow of his ego.

With a cup of coffee steaming in his hands and the comfort of an armchair supporting him, he decided it was certainly unjust, but not at all unreasonable, for a man who had barely napped all night to take a certain irritable delight in awakening another man at five — even if there were no element of masculine competition — which of course there wasn't, really. This last point he repeated very firmly to himself, after which he could give his full attention to what Ceil was saying.

She was talking in a rambling steady stream; words poured through the floodgates now with the same compulsive force that had produced the violent tears and wracking sobs of an hour earlier. He didn't have to answer; he didn't even have to listen, except to satisfy his own interest. *She* had to talk; and she would have to do a lot more of it, too. *But not all at once*, he thought drowsily, *not all of it at five o'clock in the morning.*

Sometimes it happened this way. A single shock — and having one's abdomen cut open is always a shock — was enough to jolt an individual over a sudden new threshold of maturity. Ceil had been crying for a double loss: her own childhood, as well as the baby she hadn't known she wanted till it was gone. Now she had to discover the woman she was becoming. But *not* all in the next half-hour . . .

The nurse came to the door with a meaningful look. He stood up, realizing he had waited too long to tell the girl, uncertain now which way to go. The nurse retreated from the doorway, and he stepped over to the couch, sat down on the edge, and put his hand on Ceil's arm.

"Look, kid, I have to go see somebody now. . . ."

"Oh. *I'm* sorry!" She didn't look sorry; she looked relaxed and almost radiant, under the tousled hair and behind the red eyes. "That other woman . . . she's being operated on today, isn't she?"

"Yes." And he'd damn near for-

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gotten that himself. "Yes, but that's not . . . There's somebody here to see *you*, really."

This time she didn't think first of parents. This time she knew.

"Charlie . . . !"

"*Adam*." He smiled.

"I don't . . . I don't *know* . . . ?"

He didn't smile, but it was an effort. "Well, you'll have to decide. I've got to go talk to him anyhow." He stood up and reluctantly left his half-full second cup of coffee on the tray. At the door he turned back and grinned at her. "While you're making up your mind — we might be a few minutes — you'd have time to comb your hair a little if you wanted to, and things like that. . . ."

He watched her hands fly, dismayed, to her head, and saw her quick horrified glance in the wall mirror. Her mind was made up. . . .

The boy was in the waiting room, at the end of the corridor, standing with his back to the door, staring out of the window. He was tall — taller than Edgerly — and built big; even in rumpled tweeds there was an enviable suggestion of the heroic in his stance and the set of his shoulders. Empathy, the Colonel decided, was going to be a bit harder to achieve than usual. He took a step into the room, a quiet step, he thought, but the boy turned immediately, stepped forward himself, then paused.

Eagerness turned to uncertainty in his eyes, and then to disappointment. He started to turn back to the window.

"Barton?" the Colonel asked sharply, and as the boy started forward again, the man was suddenly genuinely annoyed with himself. Of course the kid didn't know who he was; you don't spring to attention and salute a lounging figure in wrinkled slacks and open-necked shirt. For that matter, they were *both* in civvies. His irritation had been based on something else altogether.

"I'm Colonel Edgerly," he said, and was gratified to hear the trained friendliness of his own voice. "I've been looking forward to meeting you." *A little stiff, but all right . . .* He extended a hand, and the boy took it, doubtfully at first, then with increasing eager pressure.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. Mrs. Lazarus told me about you and how much you'd done for — for Ceil. I was hoping I'd get to see you while I was here."

"Nothing much to see now but an empty shell." The Colonel produced a smile. "Ceil will see you in a few minutes, I think. Might as well sit down and take it easy meanwhile. . . ." He dropped into an overstuffed chair, and waved the boy to another. "I've been in there with her since three o'clock, or somewhere around there. You'll have to excuse it if I'm not at my brightest." *Sure, excuse it. Excuse me for being fifteen years older and two inches*

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shorter. Excuse her for being seductive as all hell with a red nose. Excuse you *for being so damn handsome! Excuse it, please. . . .*

"Is she . . . is everything all *right?*" The kid was white under his tan. "They said last night she was resting comfortably. Did anything . . . ?"

"She's fine. She had a fit of the blues. It happens. Better it happened so quickly, while she was still here. . . ." He hesitated, not sure what to say next. The boy on the other chair waited, looking polite, looking concerned, looking intelligent.

A regular little nature's nobleman! the Colonel thought angrily, and gave up trying to generate any honest friendliness; he would be doing all right if he could just keep *sounding* that way.

"Now look," he said, "there are a couple of things I ought to tell you before you go in. First of all, she didn't ask to see you. It was my own idea to call you. I thought if you were here, she'd be — glad."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that."

Quite all right. No favors intended. As long as he allowed himself full inner consciousness of his resentment, he could maintain a proper surface easily. "I don't know how she'll act when you go in. She's been having a kind of crying jag, and then a talking spell. If she wants you to stick around, you can stay as long as the nurse lets you, but you ought to bear in mind that she didn't have much sleep last night, and she needs some rest. It might be better if you just checked in, so to speak, and let her know you're available, and come back later for a real visit — if she wants it. You'll have to decide that for yourselves. She . . ."

He stopped. There was so *much* the boy ought to know, so much more, in quantity and subtlety both, than he could convey in a short talk in the impatient atmosphere of a hospital waiting-room — or perhaps more than he could possibly convey to this particular person in any length of time anywhere. And he was tired — much too tired to try.

"Look," he said. "There's another patient I have to see while I'm here. The nurse will come and get you as soon as Ceil's ready for company. Just — sort of take it easy with her, will you? And if I'm not around when you're done, ask the nurse to give me a ring. I'd — like to talk to you some more."

"Yes, sir." The boy stood up. There was an easy grace in his movements that the Colonel couldn't help enjoying. "And — well, I mean, thank you, sir."

The Colonel nodded. "I'll see you later."

He spent half an hour being professionally reassuring at Nancy Kellogg's bedside, while she ate her light preoperative meal. With a clinical ear, he listened to her voice

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more than her words, and found nothing to warrant the exertion of a more personal and demanding kind of listening. As soon as he could, he broke away and went upstairs to his office, striding with determined indifference past the little room where Ceil and Charlie were talking.

There was a spare uniform in his closet. He showered and shaved in the empty locker room at the Officers' Club, and emerged feeling reasonably wide-awake and quite unreasonably hungry. It was too early yet for the Depot cafeteria to be open — not quite seven.

The Infirmary had its own kitchen, of course . . . *So that's it!* More understandable now, why he was so hungry. He usually got along fine on coffee and toast till lunch; and lunch was usually late — a good deal more than four or five hours after he woke up.

He stood undecided in the chill of the mountain-country morning, midway between the Officers' Club, the Nursemaid building, and the parking lot. All he had to do was get into his car and drive downtown to a restaurant. Not even downtown: there was an all-night joint half a mile down the road.

On the other hand, he *ought* to be around, for the Kellogg woman as much as Ceil. . . .

The Psychologist, the Officer, the Man, and a number of identifiable voices held a brisk conference, which came to an abrupt conclusion when the Body decided it was too damn cold to argue the matter out. The composite individual thereupon uttered one explosive word, and Colonel Edgerly headed for the Infirmary.

The nurse said, Yes, sir, they could get him some breakfast. Yes, sir, Mrs. Barton had seen Mr. Barton, and she was now back in bed, asleep or on her way to it. Yes, sir, Mr. Barton was waiting. In the waiting room. She had tried to call the Colonel, but he was not in his office. Mr. Barton had decided to wait.

"I told him you'd probably gone home, sir, and I didn't know if you'd be back today or not today, but . . ."

Home? There was more about the boy insisting that the Colonel wanted to see him, but he lost most of it while the realization dawned on him that it was Thanksgiving Day. He was officially not on duty at all. He could have . . .

He could have gone away for the weekend; but not having done so, he couldn't have refused the call in the middle of the night; *nor* could he leave now, with Young Lochinvar waiting to see him, and Nancy Kellogg expecting him to be around when she was done in the operating room.

". . . anything in particular you'd like to have, sir?"

Breakfast, he remembered. He smiled at the nurse. "Yeah. Ham and eggs and pancakes and potatoes and a stack of toast. Some oatmeal maybe. Couple quarts of coffee."

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She finally smiled back. "Anything that comes easy, but lots of it," he finished, and went off to find Barton.

Colonel Edgerly put his coffee cup down, lit a cigarette, and sank back into the comfortable chair, savoring the fragrance of the smoke, the flavor of food still in his mouth, the overall sense of drowsy well-being.

On the edge of the same couch where Ceil had huddled under a blanket earlier the same morning, Ceil's young man sat and talked, with almost the same determined fluency. But this time, the Colonel had no desire at all to stop the flow.

He listened, and the more he heard, the harder it got to maintain his own discomfort, or keep his jealous distance from the boy. Barton-Bolido was a good kid; there was no way out of it. And Ceil, he thought with astonishment, was another. A couple of good kids who had bumped into each other too soon and too hard. In a couple of years —

No. That's how it could have been, if they hadn't met when they did, and if the whole train of events that followed had never occurred. The way it was now, Charlie would be ripening for marriage in two or three more years; but Ceil had just this early morning crossed into the country of maturity — unaware and unsuspecting, but no longer capable of turning back to the self-centered innocence of last summer or last week.

Briefly, the Colonel turned his prying gaze inside himself and noted with irritation, but no surprise, that the inner image of the Ceil-child was still vividly exciting while the newer soldier Ceil evoked no more than warm and pleasant thoughts. Well, it wasn't a new problem, and unless he started slapping teen-age rumps, it wasn't a serious one. He returned his attention to the young lady's young man, and waited for a break in the flow of words to ask:

"I take it you and Ceil are on . . . speaking terms again?"

"*Yes*, sir."

"Good. It was important for her, I think."

"How do you mean, sir?" The boy looked vaguely frightened now.

"Just — oh, just knowing that you came, that you give a damn. . . ."

"I guess she had a pretty low opinion of me," the boy said hesitantly.

"I wouldn't put it that way," the Colonel told him, professionally reassuring.

"Well, she did. And I'm not so sure she was wrong. Frankly, sir, I'm glad it turned out the way it did. I mean, if she had to — to get *pregnant*, I'm glad she came here. I don't know what I would have . . ."

"Well, we're glad too," the Colonel interrupted. "And right now, it doesn't really matter what you would have done, if things worked out any other way. You could be a blue-dyed skunk or a one-eyed Martian and the only thing that would make any real difference is what Ceil

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thought you were. She's gone through a tough experience, and her own opinion of herself, her ability to pull out of this thing, is going to depend a lot on whether it all seemed worthwhile — which means, in part, her opinion of *you*." He stood up. "Well, I suppose as long as I'm here, I might as well get some work done. . . ."

"I didn't mean to take up so much of your time, sir."

"You didn't take it. I donated it. You going back to the hotel, or stick around here?"

"I'd like to stay around if it's all right."

"All right with me. Major Sawyer — *Dr.* Sawyer to civilians like you, boy — should be in soon. If he kicks you out, you'll have to go. Otherwise, don't get in the nurse's way, and I don't imagine anyone will care. I'll be down later myself."

He was in the doorway, when the boy called, "Colonel . . ."

He turned back.

"Colonel Edgerly, I just wanted to say — I guess I said it before, but — I want to thank you again. In case I don't see you later. Ceil — Ceil told me how much you've done for her, and how you arranged for Dean Lazarus to get in touch with me, and — well, I want you to know I appreciate it, sir."

"Aw, 'twaren't nothin'." The Colonel grinned, and added: "After all, that's what I'm here for." He went on down the corridor to the elevators, and up to his office, comfortably aware of a full stomach and a fully distended sense of virtue. Everybody would live happily ever after, and to top it all, he had a full day ahead to catch up on the neglected paper work of months behind.

The phone was ringing when he entered the office. He had heard it all the way down the corridor, buzzing with tireless mechanical persistence.

"Hello. Edgerly speaking."

"Oh, Tom. Good. They told me you were in, but switchboard couldn't find you. Told 'em to keep ringing till they got you. Could you run up for a minute? Couple things to talk over."

"Yes, sir. I'm free now, if you'd like . . ."

"Fine. Come right up."

The Colonel looked at the overstuffed *Hold* basket, and smiled. The paper work could wait. He didn't know what the General was doing there on Thanksgiving Day, and he didn't care. This conference was long past due.

VIII

The General was doing the talking; the Colonel sat in stunned silence, listening. Not the smallest part of his shock was the realization that the General not only sounded, but really was, sincere.

" . . . when you're running an outfit like this, Tom, the biggest thing is knowing whom to put the

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pressure on and when to ease up. You're a psychologist. You're supposed to be able to see something like this, even when you're the one who's concerned. These last couple months, now, you had a pretty free hand. You realize that?"

The Colonel nodded. It was true. He hadn't thought of it that way. He'd been champing at the bit, waiting for some kind of recognition. But it was true.

"Okay, I think I did the right thing. I told you what we had to have, and I told you I wasn't going to tell you how to do it. I put some pressure on, and then I left you alone. I got the results I wanted. We had three successful applicants the first nine months, and three more in less than nine weeks afterwards.

"I didn't ask how you were doing it, and I didn't want to know. It's your job, and the only time I'll mess around with what you're doing is when you're *not* getting results. The only trouble was, I didn't ask for enough, or I didn't do it soon enough. I should have allowed for a bigger margin of safety, and I didn't. That was my fault, not yours — but we're both stuck with it now."

Again the Colonel nodded. There were questions he should ask, ideas he should generate, but all he could feel at the moment was overpoweringly sleepy.

The General surprised him again.

"I take it you had a rough night. Suppose you take a copy of the transcript with you. Look it over. If you get any ideas, I'll be right here. I've got to have an answer Monday morning, and it better be a good one."

The Colonel took the stapled set of onionskins, and stood up.

"Sorry to spoil your holiday," the General rumbled.

The Colonel shrugged. "At least the holiday gives us a few days to figure things out."

The General nodded, and they both forgot to smile.

Back in his office, with a container of coffee getting cold on his desk, the Colonel read the transcript of the telephone conversation all the way through, carefully, and then through again.

The call had been put through to the General's home phone at 7:28 that morning, from the Pentagon in Washington. Apparently there had been some sleepless nights on that end too, after the arrival of the Satellite Rocket the evening before.

The conversation ran to seven typed pages. The largest part of it was a gingerbread facing of elaborately contrived informalities and irrelevancies. Behind the façade of jovial threats and ominous pleasantries, the facts were these:

For reasons as yet unknown, there had been three "premature" deliveries of PN's on the Base: that is, the babies had come to term and been delivered from their tanks, healthy and whole, several weeks in advance of the expected dates. The

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three "births," plus two that *were* expected, had all occurred within a 36 hour period, at a time when only two of the three FP's were on Base. Mrs. Harujian was on Satelleave; and to complicate matters, Mrs. Lenox, the first one to go up, was suffering at the time from an attack of colitis, a lingering after-effect of her first long unrelieved spell of duty.

Army nurses had had to put in extra time, spelling the two women in the nursery. The extra time had been sufficient to foul up the Satelleave schedule for the regular Army staff on Base. A four-star General who had gone on the rocket to Satellite, for the especial purpose of conferring with a Base Captain, whose leave was canceled without notice, inquired into the reasons therefor, and returned on the rocket without having accomplished the urgent business for which he had submitted his corpulent person to the discomforts of blastoff acceleration.

The rocket had hardly touched ground, before the voice of the four stars was heard in the Pentagon. Channels were activated. Routine reports were read. Special reports analyzing the routine reports were prepared — and somewhere along the line, it became known that the PN schedule at the Depot was not what it should be.

The phone call to General Martin therefore informed him that on Monday morning a small but well-starred commission would set forth from Washington to determine the nature of the difficulties at the Depot, and make suggestions for the improvement of conditions there.

For some time the Colonel sat in his office digesting these pieces of information. At noon he went down to the infirmary; said hello to Ceil, who was awake and looking cheerful; spent half an hour talking to Mrs. Kellogg, who was being prepared for the operating room; left word that he would be with the General, if not in his own office, when she came out of anesthesia; declined, with thanks, an invitation from the staff to join them in Thanksgiving dinner; and went upstairs to see his boss.

The conference was shorter than he had expected. The General had also been doing some thinking, and had arrived at his conclusions.

"We took a gamble, and we lost, that's all," he said. "I figured by the time the shipments began to fall off enough so anybody would notice, we'd be back on a full schedule of operation again. Somebody noticed too soon, that's all. Now we have to get back to schedule right away. As long as we do that, there won't be any heads rolling. . . .

"Now this Serruto woman is ready to go on the next trip, that right?"

The Colonel nodded, waiting.

"Then you've got, what's-er-name, Breneau?, she's scheduled for January 6, that right? And Mackintosh just started training, she goes January 20? Okay, I want those two

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accelerated. I'll give you any facilities or help you need, but I want them ready for December 23 and January 6 instead."

The Colonel did some quick figuring, and nodded. "We can manage that."

"Okay. The next thing is, I want somebody else started right away. You got a back file of maybe nineteen-twenty names that are open for reconsideration. Couple of 'em even had medicals already. I want one started next week. She goes up with Mackintosh January 6."

"You realize, sir, you're asking me to send up a woman I've already rejected as unsatisfactory, and to do it with only five weeks training instead of two months?"

"I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. That's an order, Colonel. You'll get it in writing tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

"Oh, hell, Tom, take it easy, will you? I'm sorry I had to put it that way, but I'm taking responsibility for this. You don't have to agree; all you have to do is produce. You give me what I want, I give them what *they* want, and after thing settle down, you can get things going more the way you want 'em."

"May I say something, sir? Before I start doing what I'm told?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"You were talking about a margin of safety. I'm worried about the same thing. You want to make sure we have enough people up there to handle a normal scheduled flow of shipments. I want to see the same thing. But sending up ten or twenty or fifty unqualified women *isn't going to give us any margin . . .* sir."

"It's sure going to *look* like one."

"Yes sir."

"All right. How would *you* do it?"

"I'd tell the Pentagon boys what we're doing, and why, and stick with it. I wouldn't start more PN's till we're sure we have enough FP's. And I'd start doing some scouting around for the FP's."

"Oh, we got back to that? The publicity campaign?"

"I still think it's a good idea."

"Okay, Tom, let's get a couple of things straight. You made a suggestion, and I didn't pay any attention, and you went ahead and tried it out anyhow. Yeah, sure I know about it. What do you think I meant this morning about knowing when to put on pressure? You did it the right way. You were discreet and sensible, and it worked — a one-man campaign, fine.

"But what you could do that way wasn't enough, so you sent me another little note, because you wanted to get it set up officially, and expand it. Well, look, Tom, I don't want to sound insulting. I know you know a lot about people, that's your job. But you know 'em one-at-a-time, Tom, and it's been *my* business for a hell of a long time to know them all-in-a-bunch, and believe me —

"You start a big full-scale public-

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ity campaign on this thing, and we'll be out of business so fast, you won't know what hit you. The American people won't stand for it, if they know what's going on here."

"They know now, sir. We're not Secret."

"Yeah. They know. If they subscribe to the New York *Times* and read the science column on page 36. Sure we're not Secret; the Project is part of the knowledge of every well-informed citizen. And how many citizens does that include? Look at the Satellite itself, Tom. It was no secret. The people who read the small print knew all about it way back some time in the 1940's when it was mentioned in a congressional budget. But it sure as hell surprised the citizens when it got into the sky — and into the headlines. We can't risk the headlines yet. If people knew *all* about us . . . well, probably we could win over a good majority. But if all they see is the headlines and the lead paragraphs and the editorials in the opposition papers . . . and don't think they aren't going to make it sound as if the government was running a subsidized abortion ring! Does that make it any clearer?"

"Yes, sir. A lot clearer."

"Okay. I'll get official orders typed up in the morning, and a new schedule for trainees. Now you might as well knock off, and enjoy what's left of the holiday. Start worrying tomorrow. . . ."

Colonel Edgerly sat in a chair by the head of a hospital bed and listened to fears and complaints, and was grateful that Nancy Kellogg was really married, and had three children and a husband at home, and was not going to go off any deep ends in the immediate future. He made little jokes and reassuring noises, and held the little pan for her when she was sick the second time.

With the surface of his mind he listened to everything she said and could have repeated a perfect catalogue of all her aches and pains. When she moved onto the subject of previous deliveries, he asked interested questions at appropriate intervals. She wanted to talk, and that was fine, because as long as he kept the top surface busy, he didn't have to pay attention to what was going on farther down.

When she began to get sleepy, he went and found Ceil, who was watching television out in the staff room. She turned off the set and started a stream of nervous small talk, from which he could gather only that she had been doing some heavy thinking and had a lot to say, but didn't know how to say it. Whatever it was, it did not seem to be particularly explosive or melancholy; when the nurse came to tell her it was time to be back in bed, he ignored the girl's hopeful look, and said he would see her next day.

He started off up the corridor,

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knowing what he was heading for and hoping something or someone would stop him. Nothing and nobody did. He stepped through the wide door at the far end of the hall, and waited while the student nurse encased him in sterile visitor's coveralls. Inside, he wandered up and down the rows of tanks, stopping occasionally to stare through a glassed top as if he could see through the membrane and the liquids, or even perhaps through pale flesh and cartilage and embryonic organs, to some secret center of the soul, to the small groupings of undeveloped cells that would some day spell *mind* and *psyche* in the walking, living, growing, feeling, thinking bodies of these flat-faced fetal prisoners.

Charlie, the Kaydet, had said to him wistfully, "I wish the kid could have my name." To carry to the stars, he meant. But not right now, not here on Earth, oh no, that would be too embarrassing. . . .

On the tanks there were no names: just numbers. And in the office down the hall, a locked file case contained a numbered folder full of names and further numbers and reports and charts and graphs of growth and in every folder of the 37, one name at least appeared. His own.

They're not my *babies*, he thought angrily, and with reluctance: *Yes they are.*

You need to get married, he told himself clinically. *Have one of your own* . . .

That would be an answer, one kind of answer. But *not* an answer to the problem now at hand. It was an answer for girls like Ceil, and later for boys like Charlie — for the people who had listened to his promises and pledges, and walked away, and left their babies here.

They walked out. So can I. . . . The job the Generals wanted done was not a job that he could do. *So quit!* It could be done. The typed-out request for a transfer was in his pocket now. Quit now, and let them find him a job that wasn't too big for a merely human being. Get married, have some kids. Let somebody else . . .

He couldn't.

If he knew *which* somebody, if there were a Colonel Edgerly to talk to him and reassure him and promise him, so he'd *believe* it, that his babies would be cared for . . .

He laughed, and the vapor forming on the face-plate of the sterile suit made him aware that he was uncomfortably warm and had been in there too long. He went out and stripped off the coveralls. His uniform was wet with sweat, and he smelled of it. Through empty halls he went upstairs, avoiding even the elevator, grateful to meet no one on the way. In his own office, he stood and stared out of the window at the faint edge of sunset behind the mountains, no more than a glow of red shaping the ridges against a dark sky.

He took the wilted sheet of paper

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from his pocket and would have torn it up, but instead he opened the bottom desk drawer and filed it with all the other unfulfilled acts of rebellion.

The parents of these children could walk out, and had done so. But the man who had eased the responsibility from their shoulders, who had used his knowledge of human beings and his trained skill in dealing with them to effect the transfer of a living human embryo from its natural mother to a tank of surrogate nutrient, the man who had dared to determine that one particular infant, as yet technically unborn, would be one of the thousand who would grow up not-quite-Earthmen, to become the representatives of Earth over as-yet-uncoverable distances — the man who had done all this could not then, calmly, doff his Godhead, hand it to another man, and say, "I quit," and walk away.

He changed his clothes and got his car from the near-empty parking lot and drove. Not home. Anywhere else. He drove toward the mountains, off the highway, onto winding dirt roads that needed his full attention in the dark. He kept the window down and let the night wind beat at him and when, much later, he got home, he was tired enough to sleep.

The blessing of the Army, he thought, as he slid from wakefulness, was that there was always someone over you. Whatever authority you assumed, whatever responsibility came with it, there was always some higher authority that *could* relieve you of a Godhead you could not surrender.

IX

In the morning, he felt calm and almost cheerful. His own personal decision was made, and the consequences were clear to him, but the career that had mattered very much at one time seemed comparatively unimportant at this juncture.

He checked off the list of appointments for the day — Kellogg, Barton, Mackintosh, two new names, FP applicants; he read the mail, and read the typed orders and schedule that came down from the General's office; he went efficiently through the day's routine, and whenever there was ten minutes to spare, he worked on the report the General required for Monday morning.

Saturday was an easier day. He talked to Ceil in the morning, and signed her release, and told her to come see him any time she felt she wanted to. Then he went upstairs, and finished the report. Read it through, and tore it up, half-angry and half-amused at the obvious intent of his defiance. Making sure you get fired is not at all different from quitting.

He went carefully through the card-file of rejects and selected half a dozen names, then started the re-

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port again. Along toward mid-afternoon, he buzzed the Sergeant to order a belated lunch sent up, and not till after he had hung up did he stop to wonder what she was doing at her desk. She was supposed to go off duty at noon on Saturdays. He picked up the phone again.

"Hey, Sarge — didn't you hear the noon whistle?"

"Noon . . . ? Oh. Yes, sir."

"You don't have to stick around just because I do, you know. They don't pay overtime in this man's Army any more."

"I . . . don't mind, sir. There's nothing special I have to do today. I thought if I stayed to answer the phone, you could . . . you'll want that report typed when you're finished, won't you, sir?"

Well, I'll be damned! He was surprisingly touched by her thoughtfulness. "It was good of you to think of it, Helen." As soon as the words were out, he realized how wrong they were. Too formal, and then her first name — it didn't sound like what he meant. "I appreciate it," he added, even more stiffly.

"That's all right, Colonel. I really don't mind. I didn't have anything special to do, and I just thought . . ."

He put the receiver down, got up quickly, and opened the connecting door. She was sitting there, still holding her phone, looking slightly baffled and faintly embarrassed. He grinned, as the click of the door-latch startled her. "You're a good kid, Sarge, but there's no sense hanging onto a phone with nobody on the other end."

She flushed, and replaced the receiver on its hook. Apparently anything he said was going to be wrong — but this was hardly surprising when, after four months of almost daily association, he suddenly found a person instead of a uniform sitting at the outside desk.

"Tongue-tied schoolboy, that's me," he said defiantly. "I just never learned how to say *Thank You* politely. Even when I mean it. I think it was damned decent of you to stay, and I appreciate what you've done so far, but I'm not going to let you toss away the whole weekend just because *I'm* stuck in the mud. Look . . . did you order that stuff yet?"

"No . . . no, sir."

"Could you stand to drink a cup of coffee?" He grinned. "With a superior officer, I mean?"

Almost, she smiled. *The* Almost *Perfect Lady Soldier*, he thought with relief.

"Yes, sir, I think I could."

"All right. Pick up your marbles and let's get out of here. I could use a break myself. After that," he finished, "you're going home. I'll tell the switchboard I've gone myself, and let them take any calls. And as far as the typing goes, I don't know when I'm going to have this thing finished. It could be 3 o'clock in the morning . . . and I can always get one of the kids from the pool to type

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it up tomorrow, if I'm too lazy to do it myself."

She frowned faintly; then her face smoothed out again into its customary unruffled surface of competence. "You're the boss." She smiled and shrugged almost imperceptibly. "Let's go!"

He had thought he wanted company. A short break would be good. Generalized conversation — enforced refocusing of attention — sandwich and coffee — twenty minutes of non-concentration. Fine. But all the way to the commissary he walked in silence, and when they found a table and sat down, it took only the simplest query — "How's it coming?" — to set him off.

He talked.

For an hour and a half, while successive cups of coffee cooled in front of him, he talked out all he meant to say. Then when he finally looked at the clock and found it read almost 5; he said, abashed, "Hey — didn't I tell you to go home?"

"I'm glad I didn't," she said.

There was a note of intensity in the saying of it that made him look more closely. She meant it! It wasn't a proper secretarial remark.

"So am I," he told her with equal seriousness. "I got more done yakking at you here than I would have in five hours, crumpling up sheets at my desk. Thanks."

He smiled, and for an instant he thought the uniform would slip away entirely, but the answering smile was only in her eyes. At least, he thought, she'd refrained from giving him her standard Receptionist's Special. . . .

He didn't do any more that day. Sunday morning, he went into the office early, and started all over again, this time knowing clearly what he meant to say, and how. When the phone rang, at 11, he had almost completed a final draft.

"This is Helen Gregory, sir. I thought I'd call, and find out if you wanted that report typed up today . . . ?"

Bless you, gal! "As a matter of fact, I'm just about done with it now," he started, and then realized he had almost been betrayed by her matter-of-fact tone into accepting the sacrifice of the rest of her weekend. "It's not very long," he finished, not as he'd planned. "I'll have plenty of time to type it up myself. Take yourself a day off, Sarge. You earned it yesterday, even if you didn't have it coming anyway."

"I . . . really don't mind." Her voice had lost its easy certainty. "I'd *like* to come in, if I can help."

Ohmigod! He should have known better than to crack a surface as smooth as hers. Yesterday afternoon had been a big help, but if she was going to start playing mama now . . .

"That's very kind of you, Helen," he said. "But there's really no need for it."

"Whatever you say . . ." She sounded more herself again — or

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her familiar self — but still she left it hanging, clearly not content. He pretended not to notice.

"Have a good day," he said cheerfully. "Tomorrow we maybe die. And thanks again."

"That's all right, sir. I really — I suppose I'm just curious to see how it came out, really."

"Pretty good, I think. I hope. I'll leave a copy on your desk to read in the morning. Like to know what you think — Hey! where do you keep those report forms?"

"Middle drawer on the left. The pale green ones. They're quadruplicate, you know — and onionskin for our file copy is the top drawer on that side."

"It's a good thing you called. I'd have had the place upside down trying to figure that out. Thanks, Sarge — and take it easy."

He hung up thoughtfully; then shook his head and dismissed the Sergeant, and whatever problems she might represent, from his immediate universe. He spent another half-hour changing and rewording the final paragraph of the report, and when he was satisfied that he at least could not improve it further, found the forms and carbon sheets neatly stacked where she'd said. A hell of a good secretary, anyhow. Nothing wrong in her wanting to mother-hen a little bit. *He* was the one who was over-reacting. . . .

The father-pot calling the mother-kettle neurotic, he thought bitterly. And *that* was natural enough too. Who could possibly resent it more?

He stacked a pile of sheets and inserted them in the typewriter, wishing now he'd been rational enough to trade on the girl's better nature, instead of rejecting so hard. It would take him a couple of hours to turn out a decent-looking copy. She could have done it in thirty-minutes. . . .

The phone jangled at his elbow; he hit two keys simultaneously on the machine, jamming it, and reached for the receiver.

"Colonel Edgerly . . . ?"

Excited young female type. *Not* the Lady Soldier.

"Speaking."

"Oh . . . *Tom.* Hello. This is Ceil." She didn't have to tell him; he knew from the breathless way she said his first name. "I tried to call you at home, but you weren't there. . . . I hope I'm not busting into something *important?*"

"Well, as a matter of fact —" Whatever it was she wanted, this wasn't his day to give it out. "Look, kid, will it keep till tomorrow? I've got a piece of work here I'm trying to finish up —" Maybe *she* could type, he thought, and reluctantly abandoned the idea.

". . . really what I wanted anyhow," she was saying. He had missed something and, backtracking, missed more. ". . . only time we're both free, and I wanted to check with you ahead of time . . ." Who was *both?* Charlie maybe? Coming to ask for his blessing?

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I'm getting hysterical, he decided, and managed to say goodbye as calmly as if he knew what the call had been about. Tomorrow. She'd come in tomorrow, and then he'd find out.

One isolated phrase jumped out of the lost pieces: ". . . called yesterday . . ." The Sergeant had been turning away calls all day, and he hadn't looked at the slips when he left, because he thought he was coming back.

He found them on her desk, neatly stacked. Ceil had called twice: no message. A Mrs. Pinckney of the local Child Placement Bureau wanted to speak with him about a matter of importance; he dimly remembered meeting her at the Lazarus' party. Two candidates for FP had made appointments for next week. The rest were interdepartmental calls, and the Sarge had handled them all.

His hand hesitated briefly over the phone as he considered calling Sergeant Gregory and giving them both the gratification of allowing her to do the typing for him. Then he took himself firmly in hand, and headed back to the inner office and the typewriter. No need to pile up future grief just to avoid a couple of hours of tedium.

He settled down, unjammed the stuck keys, and started again with a fresh stack of paper.

In the morning, over his breakfast coffee, he read again through the carbon copy he had brought home, and decided it would do. He had managed to give the General what he'd asked for, and at the same time state his own position, with a minimum of wordage and — he hoped — a maximum of clarity.

The report began by complying with the specific request of the General: it listed the names of six rejected candidates who might be reconsidered. The first three, all of whom he recommended, included Mrs. Leahy, the madam; Mrs. Buonaventura, who had failed to be sent through for further testing because she had only one arm; and a Mr. George Fitzpatrick, whose application had been deferred, rather than rejected, since they planned to start sending men later.

He pointed out that in the first two cases the particular disabilities of the ladies would not, in practice, make any difference to their effectiveness; and in the case of the man — if the program were to be accelerated other ways, why not this way too?

There followed a list of three names, conscientiously selected as the least offensive of those in his file who might be expected to qualify on Medic and Security checks; in these three cases he undertook, as Psychological Officer, to qualify any or all for emergency appointments of two months, but added that he could not, in his professional capacity, sign his name to full-term contracts for any one of them.

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The next section was a single page of figures and statistics, carefully checked, recommending a general slow-down for the Project, based on the percentage of acceptable FP candidates encountered so far. A semi-final paragraph proposed an alternate plan: that if the total number of applicants for FP positions could be increased, by means of an intelligently directed publicity program, the number of acceptable candidates might be expected to be large enough to get the Project back to its original schedule in three months.

And then the final paragraph:

"It should be remembered, in reviewing this situation, that on this Project we are dealing with human beings, rather than inanimate objects, and that rigid specifications of requirements must in each individual case be interpreted by the judgment of another human being. As an Officer of the Space Service, whose duty it is to make such judgments, I cannot, in all conscience, bring myself to believe that I should include in my considerations any extraneous factors, no matter of what degree of importance. My official approval or rejection of any individual can be based only on the qualifications of that individual."

He read it through, and drove to work, wondering what the chances were that anyone besides the General would ever see it.

The day was routine, if you discounted the charged air of suspense that circulated through the building from the time the three star-studded Washingtonians drove into the parking lot and disappeared into the General's office. The Colonel conducted the usual number of interviews, made minor decisions, emptied a box of kleenex, and replaced it.

For the Colonel, there was a feeling of farce in every appointment made for the future and every piece of information carefully elicited and faithfully recorded. But the Sergeant, at least, seemed to have come back to normal, and played the role of Lady Soldier with such conviction that the whole absurd melodrama seemed, at times, almost real. She complimented him gravely on the report when she handed him his list of appointments; thereafter, the weekend and its stresses seemed forgotten entirely in the familiar routine of a Monday morning.

At 10:30, Mrs. Pinckney called again. It seemed she was going to a social welfare convention in Montreal next month; would the Colonel like to work with her on part of a paper she meant to present there, in which she could "plug" the Project?

He couldn't tell her, through the office switchboard, that the boss had rapped his knuckles and threatened to wash his mouth with soap if he kept talking about indelicate matters outside the office. He suggested that they get together during the week; he'd call her when he saw

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some free time. She hung up, obviously chagrined at the coolness of his tone, and immediately the phone buzzed again.

This time it was the Sergeant. "I just remembered, sir, there were some phone slips from Saturday that you didn't see."

"Thanks. I picked 'em up yesterday."

"Oh. Then you know Mrs. Barton called? She seemed very eager —".

"Yuh. She called again yesterday. That's what made me check the slips. Oh, yes. She's coming in today, sometime."

"She didn't say when, sir?"

"No. Or I'm not sure. If she did, I don't remember." And what difference did it make?

"Shall I call her back and check, sir?"

"I don't see why." It was getting irritating now. Apparently, the Sergeant was going to remain slightly off-keel about anything connected with the weekend. Well, he thought, one could be grateful at least for small aberrations — if they stayed small. "She'd be in class now, anyhow," he added sharply.

"Yes, sir. It's just that I understand you'll probably be going up to the Conference right after lunch. So if it was important . . ."

"It wasn't," he said with finality. "If I'm busy when she comes in, she can wait."

"Yes, sir."

He hung up, wondered briefly about the exact nature of the rumor channels through which the secretaries of the Depot seemed always to know before the decisions were actually made just what was going to happen where and when, gave it up as one of the great insoluble mysteries, and went back to the ridiculous business of carrying on the normal day's work.

At noon, the General's secretary informed Sergeant Gregory that the General and his visitors were going out to lunch and that the Colonel's presence was requested when they returned, at 1330 hours. The Sergeant reported the information to her superior. He thanked her, but she didn't go away. She stood there, looking uncomfortable.

"Something else?"

"Yes, sir, there is. It's . . . not official."

There was an urgency in her tone that drove away his first quick irritation. He focused on her more fully, and decided that if this was more of the mothering act, it was bothering her even more than it did him. "Sit down, Sergeant," he said gently. "What's on your mind?"

"No, thanks. I . . . all right." She sat down. "I . . . just wanted to tell you, sir . . . I mean I thought I ought to let you know before you go up . . ."

"Yes?" he prompted. *And* where *has my little Lady Soldier gone?*

"It's about your report. I can't tell you how I know, sir, but I understand the General turned it over

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to the other officers. Maybe I should have . . ."

"Excuse me." He was beginning to feel a burst of excitement. His first reaction to the idea of being included in the Conference at all had been a sinking certainty that Edgerly was going to play Goat after all. But if they'd seen his report . . . "I won't ask you how you know, but I do want to find out just how reliable your source is," he said eagerly. It was possible, just *barely* possible, that his ideas might be given some serious consideration by the Investigating Committee!

"It's reliable," she said tightly and paused, then went on with quick-worded determination: "Perhaps I should have said something before, when I read it, but it was too late by then to make any changes, so I . . . I mean, if you'd agreed with me, sir. But the way you wrote the report, it does — excuse me, sir, but it makes such a perfect out for the General! *I* know you've been cooperating with him, and *he* knows it, but anyone who just read the report . . ." She stood up, not looking at him, and said rapidly, "I just thought I ought to let you know before you go up, the way it looks to me, and how it might look to them. I'm sorry if I should have spoken up sooner."

She turned and almost ran for the door.

"That's all right, Sarge," he said, almost automatically. "It wouldn't have done any good to tell me this morning. I should have let you come in yesterday. . . ."

Just before the door closed, he had a glimpse of a shy smile in which gratitude, apology, and sympathy merged to warm friendliness. But the marvel of this, coming from the Sergeant, was lost entirely in the hollowness of his realization that he was going to get what he wanted. He was going to get fired. The General had passed the buck with expert ease, and Tom Edgerly would be quietly relieved of a post that was too big for him, and —

He felt very very sick.

X

The two girls walked in through the open door, just how much later he didn't know. He'd been sitting with his back to the desk, staring out the window, remembering the care he had taken to write that report in such a way as to defeat his own acknowledged weakness, and marveling bitterly at the subconscious skill with which he had composed the final document.

He heard the noise behind him, a hesitant cough-and-shuffle of intrusion, and turned, realizing that Helen would have gone out for lunch and left the doors open.

It was Ceil; the other girl with her was the last PN before her. They had met in the Infirmary, he supposed; Janice had gone home last Tuesday; Ceil came in Monday. Yeah.

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They both looked very intense. *Not today, kids. Some other time.* He stood up, and smiled, and began rehearsing the words to get rid of them.

Ceil stepped forward hesitantly. "Was this a bad time to come? If you're busy, we could make it tomorrow instead. It's just, lunch hour is the only time we're both free, and we wanted to come together. Jannie works late . . ."

She was chattering, but only because she had sensed something wrong.

"It's not a good day," he said slowly, and glanced at his watch and back at the girls, and knew defeat again. Whatever it was, it was *important* — to them.

"Well, we can come in tomor —"

"You're here now," he pointed out, and formed his face into a smile. "I have some time now, anyhow." The time didn't matter to him. He had more than half an hour yet before he had to go upstairs and get put to sleep in the mess of a bed he had made. "Sit down," he said, and pulled the extra chair away from the wall over to the desk.

They sat on the edge of their seats, leaning forward, eager, and both of them started talking at once, and then both stopped.

"You tell him," Ceil said. "It was your idea first."

"You can say it better," the other one said.

For God's sake, one *of you get to it!* "Spit it out," he said brusquely.

They looked at each other, and Ceil took a deep breath, and said evenly: "We want to apply for Foster Parent positions."

He smiled tolerantly. Then he stopped smiling. It was impossible, obviously. A couple of kids —

"Why?" he asked, and as a jumble of answers poured out, he thought, with mounting elation, *Why not?*

"My mother acts like I committed a sin. . . ." That was Janice.

"In two years, Charlie can get married. . . ."

". . . maybe I did, but if I helped to take care of some of them . . ."

". . . I'd know more about how to manage in a place like that, in case we did . . ." Ceil.

". . . even if it wasn't my own . . ."

That was the catch, of course. They'd play favorites. They'd — if they didn't *know* — Mrs. Mackintosh had said, *if you weren't so obviously oriented in the opposite direction* . . .

Janice — she was the one who'd had an affair with her boss. He was going to marry her of course, but when she found out she was pregnant, it turned out he already had a wife. No job, no man. He would pay for her to get rid of it — but she wouldn't. She couldn't. And she couldn't stay home and have it; it would *kill* her mother, she said. . . .

Ceil — Ceil came in as a child, not knowing, not understanding, and downstairs, in a hospital bed, she grew up.

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A couple of kids, sure. But *women*, too. Grown women, with good reasons for wanting to do a particular job.

He heard the Sergeant come in, and flew into a whirlwind of activity. It was 1:15. By 1:27, they had both applications neatly filled out and the already-completed Medical and Security checks out of the folders. The psych tests for FP's were more comprehensive than the ones they'd had, but he knew enough to figure he was safe.

He took another twenty seconds to run a comb through his hair and straighten his tie. Then he went upstairs.

The Colonel sat at his desk, and filled in an application form neatly and quickly. He signed his name at the bottom and stood up and looked out the big window and laughed without noise, till he realized there was a tear rolling down his cheek.

It was all over now, but it would all begin again tomorrow morning, and the next day, and the next. The visiting Generals had accomplished their purpose, which was to goose Nursemaid into action, and had gone back home. The resident General had come through without a blot on his record, because it was all the Colonel's fault. The Colonel had come through with a number of new entries in his record, and whether they shaped up to a blot or a star he could not yet tell.

The interview had been dramatic, but now the drama was done with and the last piddling compromise had been agreed on: the two new candidates; plus the man, Fitzpatrick; plus consideration for men from now on; plus reviewing the backfiles of PN's to see how many more were willing; plus the trickle that could be expected from this source in the future; plus an overall 20 per cent slowdown in the original schedule; plus policy conferences in Washington on the delicate matter of publicity; plus a reprimand to the Colonel for his attitude, and a commendation to the Colonel for his work . . .

He pushed the buzzer, and the Sergeant came in.

"Sit down," he told her.

She sat.

"It just occurred to me," he said, "that the — uh — dramatic statements on those applications you typed up were . . . extraordinarily well put?" He kept the smile back, with a great effort.

"What statements did you mean, sir?" The Perfect Lady Soldier had her perfect deadpan back.

"The last questions, Sergeant. *You* know — 'Why do you desire to . . .' The answers that were all about how Colonel Edgerly had inspired the applicants with understanding, patriotism, maternal emotion, and — similar admirable qualities."

"I —" There was a faint, but not quite repressed, glint in the Ser-

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geant's eye. "I'm afraid, sir, I suggested that they let me fill that in; it would be quicker, I thought, than trying to take down everything they wanted to say."

"Sergeant," he said, "are you aware that those applications become a part of the permanent file?"

"Yes, sir." Now she was having trouble not looking smug.

"And are you also aware that it is desirable to have truthful replies in those records?"

"Yes, sir." She didn't feel smug now, and for a moment he was afraid he'd carried the joke too far. He meant to thank her, but . . . "Yes, sir," she said, and looked directly at him, not hiding anything at all. "I wrote the truth as I saw it, sir."

The Colonel didn't answer right away. Finally he said, "Thanks. Thanks a lot, Sergeant."

"There's nothing to thank me for." She stood up. "I hope it — helped?"

"I'm sure it did."

She took a step, and stopped. "I'm glad. I think — if you don't mind my saying so, sir, I think they'd have a hard time finding anybody else to do the job you're doing. I mean, to do it as well."

He looked at her sharply, and then at the filled-out form on his desk.

"I guess I have to say *Thank You* again." He smiled, and realized her embarrassment was even greater than his own.

"I'll — is there anything else you want, sir? I was just going to leave when you buzzed —" Her eyes were fixed one foot to the right of his face, and her cheeks were red.

"Yes," he said. "There is something else — unless you're in a hurry. It can wait till tomorrow, if you have a date or anything."

"No, sir. I'm free."

"All right, then. What do you like to drink, and where would you prefer to eat? I have lousy taste in perfume, and I owe you something, God knows — besides which, it's about time we got acquainted; we may be working together for a while, after all."

She was still embarrassed, but she was also pleased. And his quick glimpse before had not fully prepared him for how sweet her smile was, when she wasn't doing it professionally.

There was just one more thing he had to do before he left.

He took the application for a Foster Parent position from the top of his desk — the one with his own name signed to it — and filed it in the bottom desk drawer. There was a job to be done here — a job he couldn't possibly do right. The requirements were too big, and the limitations were too narrow. It was the kind of a job you could never be sure was done right — or even done. But the Sergeant — who was in a position to know — thought he could do it better than anyone else.

Time enough to go traipsing off to the Moon when he finished as much of the job as they'd *let* him do, here.

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In which a Washington writer depicts the unforeseeable influence of Frank R. Stockton upon interstellar contacts.

Dywyk

by DORIS P. BUCK

THE POLYHEDRAL SPACESHIPS HAD first been telescopically observed on July 14 — Bastille Day, 1961. On July 18 two went up in flames on smashing into Earth's atmosphere, for which they seemed unprepared. On July 19 the armada, except for three vessels, withdrew beyond telescopic range. Four days later the three, orbiting spirally downward to brake their speed, landed successfully on the Atlantic, off Virginia, then bobbed rapidly up the Potomac. They stopped outside Washington, close to the National Airport. There the aliens, ignoring the small craft following them, hopped onto land before anyone could make other arrangements.

The Assistant Secretary of State, several scientists with assorted clearances, and numerous lesser dignitaries, hurried to them. They were twice the size of kangaroos and suggested a cross between a grasshopper and a praying mantis, except for their tails. Like insects, they had exoskeletons. These were glossy black except, again, for the tails, which consisted of small disks of every imaginable color. They tinkled musically with every movement; by contrast, the creatures' joints sounded as if they needed oiling.

The Things, of which there were 27, had neither noses nor ears, but they frequently set up masts resembling small radio antennae on the ends of their oddly shaped, triple-eyed heads. They also, on their second day here, fitted silvery tubes over their mandibles. After that, they talked quite clearly — above the din of their disks and joints — in pleasant contralto voices. Either they were telepathic, or they had been making a special study of English — or possibly both. Their first remark was that they would consider it a favor if no one asked them questions until the second week of their visit. This request was scrupulously honored.

They were never seen to eat, but on the fifth day of the first week, during which they had gone sightseeing with great thoroughness, they asked if they could have brandy

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Alexanders sent out to the ships at the cocktail hour. On the sixth day they asked to have a sampling of literature read aloud to them, if that would not be inconvenient. Washington hostesses begged to have this take place in private homes; and competition became savage for K clearances, which anyone now had to have who dealt with the creatures.

At first there was an attempt to read the same material to all. But this broke down. One dear little old lady, who lived in a large Victorian mansion, read them Frank R. Stockton's *The Lady, or The Tiger?* This was the only work on which they made comments. They were certain their hostess was keeping the ending back. She explained again and again: the story was a popular teaser. No one, perhaps not even the author, knew whether the hero found the court damsel or the tiger when he opened the door in the arena. This left the aliens wholly unsatisfied.

"Don't you wish you knew?" they asked.

"I do not," she said. "The charm lies in that baffling close."

"Are you sure" (by now they used the vernacular easily) "that you aren't holding out on us?"

"I'm certain," she answered indignantly.

The next day the Things were a little late in starting their sightseeing. When they appeared, they asked, a shade brusquely, if they might visit all government agencies referred to only by initials. This was quite a program; they covered everything from ACA (Advisory Committee on Aeronautics) and ADERB (Animal Diseases Eradication Research Branch) to the revived USSBOS (United States Strategic Bombing Survey) and VOCREC (Voluntary Credit Restraint Committee). "Poetic," murmured one of them; "these stir the mind."

The aliens returned, unusually quiet, to their ships, and most people in Washington and the metropolitan area presently went to bed. Those who worked or played by night found themselves unaccountably sleepy. When all wakened (three days afterward as astronomers informed them), the Potomac was empty of anything extraterrestrial. The Naval Observatory reported nothing unusual in the sky.

But along the Mall in Washington, at carefully spaced intervals of two feet, three inches, lay a line of hexahedrons, roughly the size of children's pencil boxes. Only a few were identical. They were honeycombed, of various coppery shades, and slightly warm. If people tried to pick them up, they began to glow and become incandescent. The ground around them smoked and soon scorched in widening areas. Even scientists learned to leave them alone.

Attached to the front of each object was a plate engraved with the word DYWYK.

There was speculation, sensational and scientific. A generally accepted

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view was that the creatures had left eggcases. If these hatched and the immature young grew to full size, many people thought they would attempt to take over Earth. Others felt peaceful coexistence would be possible. Methods of destroying the objects were tried. None worked. Some men contended the coppery substance was left behind to poison our atmosphere. Others said the Things had left a landmark for future expeditions; the small size of the dywyks — as everyone called them — and the fact that they did not glow at night made this unlikely.

The dywyks could of course be gifts — a bread and butter present from outer space which Earth did not know enough to utilize. They might be trash, though the obvious care with which they were placed made that unlikely.

For a while a debate between those who supported the eggcase theory and those who championed the trash theory crowded other material off the editorial page of the Washington *Post*. Men grew tense, even ugly, arguing that the heat was a protective device to guard something precious or that it was a purely accidental reaction and one that would destroy eggs if they were there. Interest and even fear grew to such proportions that Congress offered a reward to anyone who could explain the term DYWYK.

"Of course," said the dear little old lady one day at a party where — as at all parties of the time — brandy Alexanders were the popular drink, "I could tell what DYWYK means. But that doesn't get us anywhere."

"Go on!" Everyone was agog.

"You see, they learned from me and Mr. Stockton our fondness for enigmas, and from the government our way of naming things. So, naturally, DYWYK."

"But what does it mean?" demanded her eminent host.

"Don't you wish you knew?" she asked gently.

"Don't I just!" And then suddenly, with the clarity of the fifth brandy Alexander, he exclaimed, "DYWYK! Don't You Wish You Knew . . . in governmentese!"

"Of course," the dear little old lady nodded. "But then," she shrugged, "that isn't any real answer, is it?"

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With that same detailedly persuasive conviction that marked his study of The Rats *(F&SF, December, 1951),* The Fly *(F&SF, September, 1952),* The Ruum *(F&SF, October, 1953) and* The Grom *(F&SF, November, 1954), Arthur Porges now examines the strange life-cycle of a being whose extraordinary intelligence affords it no protection against a world in which life or death is harshly determined by the merest happenstance.*

By a Fluke

by ARTHUR PORGES

IT IS POSSIBLE TO BE VERY INTELLIGENT and yet completely helpless — at the mercy of a capricious environment.

For countless generations my short-lived race has contemplated with justifiable bitterness the dominance of a species — they call themselves humans — essentially our mental inferiors, but blessed with a large life-span and superb appendages for the manipulation of matter and energy in a variety of forms.

Because of these two priceless attributes, long life and toolholding fingers, they rule the earth, while we can only tune in on a few of their thoughts — many wholly irrational — and fight our joyless, never-ending battle for individual survival.

In the fields of mathematics and philosophy we far surpass these lords of creation, I, myself, after only a fifth of my life had passed, easily solved a number of their most difficult problems in pure mathematics. But without experimental science, our philosophy is sterile; and even our mathematics lacks virility for being out of contact with the laboratory. The brute facts of nature are needed to leaven our metaphysical bread.

It may be futile — in fact, it almost certainly is, for me to squander these last few hours of my all too-brief existence in reciting the autobiography of one individual of my people; but for the first time we are aware, my fellows and I, of a being able to record this account. We have reason to believe that his instruments are even now receiving and preserving my ordered thoughts.

I spoke of an "account," and yet, in fairness, I will admit that it is more of a protest — a protest, pointless, of course, since nothing can be

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done, against a world, an evolutionary process, and a fate we find intolerable. Such a protest cannot change anything, but we are sufficiently like the human gods to feel somehow better for it, regardless.

But time is passing all too quickly; I must begin with a personal, yet typical, history. I hope and believe that the being, apparently from some other world, is recording it. One hates to cry aloud to mere emptiness.

My first recollection is that of the dimmest sort of consciousness, wherein I was not yet able to receive the thoughts of my people. It was a kind of suspended animation, which I now know to have been the egg-stage of my life. I seem to remember a rolling, tumbling passage down a twisting tube, through gurgling brownish liquid. That was, of course, a bile duct. Many of my own kind have I sent by that path in weeks past.

I have reason to believe that I left my egg rather quickly; that is a physiological feeling however, and not of great evidential value. Although we adults can receive the young ones' thoughts soon after they hatch, there is no way to estimate, except very approximately, how long they have had to remain in the egg. My own real awareness began when I hatched as a roughly cone-shaped, multicellular, and ciliated mite, a mere blob of living matter.

I was one of the lucky few, born in water. Had I hatched in a dry place, as did so many of my contemporaries, I should not be alive now.

You may wonder how I can know of any events outside my own limited experience. That is the tragedy of the situation: this facility of ours for exchanging thoughts and information. The heritage of the race is readily transmitted to each individual who survives long enough to absorb it. And yet, being without appendages or motility, we cannot implement this knowledge. Nor can we contact the dominant life-form, which might — one cannot be very sure — be willing to aid us. We can listen to many of their thoughts, when the range is not excessive, but they are apparently unable to receive ours. Much of our mathematical information has been acquired in this way. Our conception of their physical world, however, is vague and distorted. I have often wondered just what entities — chemical, electrical, and biological — their mathematics really involves. I can never know. Although I solve easily all varieties of differential equations, including some that have baffled the human experts, it is, for me, a purely formal process, and for that reason less intriguing than problems in the theory of numbers, which most of us prefer. In the latter field, the mathematics is all: no practical relation is implied. With applied analysis, one works in a vacuum. For example, I have solved the

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problem of *n* bodies moving in a gravitational field, but have no real feeling for the result.

But I must not digress longer. All that I meant to emphasize is that from the moment I hatched, the helpful thoughts of my elders flooded my consciousness. I knew instinctively what I must do, but the advice I received made the task easier; and above all it alleviated the terrible sensation of facing unique, unknown problems. One was briefed in advance, an enormous advantage.

There I was, a tiny blob of almost naked life, awakening in a strange medium, the liquid humans call water, and feeling within me a burning urgency, a need for rapid fulfilment, with death ticking off the precious seconds. I knew I had to find a certain organism, one that was not too common, and further a creature being hunted by hundreds of my brothers. And my time was limited. Eight hours, my advisors told me. Find It in eight hours, or you die. Swim, little one! Swim hard! But there was a kind of weariness behind their promptings. They knew how many of us must perish.

I swam, scarcely knowing what I sought; and as I whipped my cilia through the murky fluid, my mentors repeated constantly a description of the animal I needed in order to live. It was a monster compared to me, so big that I might easily fail to perceive it at all except for their promptings. This giant was clad in armor, which I must avoid; it would be wasted energy to assault it there. It was mindless, a mere brute. Men call it a snail, and give it a mouth-filling name: *Lymnea columella*.

I was one of the fortunate few. I found my snail, a colossus grating huge masses of vegetation with a toothed ribbon of a tongue. I was lucky in another way. (It is quite absurd, I realize, to keep repeating the phrase. It is axiomatic among my kind. Only the lucky minority survives; to be alive long enough to have thoughts is to be lucky by definition.) My particular snail held only a few of my fellows. Even as I prepared to force an entrance, I heard the anguished thoughts of forty-three of my contemporaries, who had all unhappily converged on another snail, which was already well-tenanted. The elders warned them, but with the same weary undertone. If you all penetrate, the host will die, and you will perish with it. Swim away, all who have a little time, and search for another snail.

They advised in vain. The instinct for survival cannot be checked by intelligence. No one would withdraw, nor could one blame them. As so often happens, they were caught in the time-trap. Each cried that his few hours were up; that there was no other snail near enough. Each apparently hoped the elders were wrong; that somehow the host would live through the mass invasion of its vitals. Or maybe they

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knew themselves to be doomed and were determined not to let any of their fellows survive. Our life pattern does not make for altruism; one regrets it, intellectually, but fully comprehends the feelings of the individual marked for death and unwilling to meet it in place of his brothers. I heard their last resentful thoughts as the snail died, becoming a poisonous mass of carrion that destroyed my fellows.

I crept over the brute's hard shell until I found soft tissues, and worked my way in. It felt good, almost like being safe in the egg again, with no pressing problems. I found a snug spot in a lymph vessel. There were others of my kind about, but I had enough room. There I settled down to meditate, learn, and await my first change, which the elders informed me would be coming soon. It was during this brief but untroubled period that I mastered many fields of philosophy and mathematics.

After a few hours, my cilia began to drop off, one by one. They were, of course, no longer useful to me, and there was no pain. I became larger, saclike, and dreamy. But my mind was clear, and I learned quickly as the elders drowned my eager receptors with waves of racial information and counsel.

Several more hours raced by, and I began to change. I felt my personality multiplying, and became aware that I was now a collective entity. This made me feel very secure; even if only one of these sub-multiples were to survive the perils ahead, it meant that *I* survived. There was no exchange of thoughts among us; we were one, and needed no communication.

This odd state did not last long, however. Almost before I realized it, I and my co-descendants were changing again. Each of us became several smaller entities, but still *en rapport* in every way. I myself became six, and shortly thereafter we, all six of us, broke free of the shell of my former body, now a dead thing, and made our way to a different part of the snail. There was much bustle, with many others on the move. But to us, the snail was a world of nearly limitless space, and we had not seriously harmed it. My little group found a pleasant place. On describing it to the elders, they were able to identify it for us as the snail's liver.

At this point in my career, my individuality suddenly returned, and I no longer felt as one with my duplicates, who went about their own, obviously similar, affairs. This was also a brief state, although long enough for me to solve a number of difficult mathematical problems while dreamily sucking nourishing fluid from the spongy mass I clung to so tenaciously. In particular, I verified two famous conjectures of human scholars: that of Goldbach, that every even integer is the sum of two primes; and another of Riemann relating to complex variables.

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I had just finished the latter problem, an exhausting exercise when done mentally, by demonstrating to my complete satisfaction that the real part of a certain function was definitely one-half, as the man had conjectured, when I found myself dividing again. It is a feeling one hardly gets used to, especially in so short a life time, and seems to happen with bewildering rapidity as well as too often. By allowing myself to become too absorbed in the last problem, I had missed the usual advance information provided by the elders, but instinct was enough.

In a short time I found myself equipped with a slender vibrile tail and handy suckers at both ends. After a hasty consultation with the elders, I wasted no more valuable moments experimenting with these new organs, but burrowed, rather regretfully, out of my cozy place by the snail's liver, through the soft body into the chilly water.

My instinct, reinforced by a stream of advice from those who had gone before, urged me towards the bank of the little pond. It was a tiresome and unpleasant swim; the tail was not as useful as my earlier cilia; and there were enemies in the water. I saw many of my fellows swallowed up by huge, brainless animals, infinitely smaller than our late host, but gigantic to us, and well-armored. Humans call them water-fleas. I had several narrow escapes myself, as they swim much faster than we do.

It was with a feeling of profound relief that I came to a giant, waving green spear of vegetation on the very edge of the water. The elders cheered me on, saying it was a grass-blade, and just what I needed. I struggled wearily almost to the top.

At this stage my consultants became rather apathetic about my fate, since now, for the first time, one's own effort meant nothing. Everything is a matter of chance from this point on, and there is a kind of anesthetic comfort in that knowledge.

Once more, and quickly, I was transformed, losing my tail and becoming a multiple entity again, protected by a tough, weatherproof shell. This is one of the longer way-stations of our episodic cycle, and I spent many fruitful days on mathematics. It was during this period that I disproved a famous speculation: Fermat's Last Theorem, men call it, which states there are no non-trivial integral solutions of the equation $X^n + Y^n = Z^n$ for n an integer greater than two. I found, oddly enough, and without really expecting to, that there are exactly two prime values of n between 2^{4176} and 2^{4177} for which solutions exist. What a pity that I can't pass this surprising fact along to the human mathematicians, with whom, in spite of their racial arrogance and my bitterness, I feel some kinship of the intellect.

Listening to the comments of my older fellows, I knew what to hope

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for. Another animal, a really titanic thing, was now necessary for my survival. But it had to seek me out; there was absolutely nothing I could do; my motility was gone.

It was a matter of pure chance that I did survive. I was one of the last of my generation to be saved.

One of the enormous beasts did come by, gulped me down, and parting company with my sub-units, each of which now became a separate personality, I burrowed through the creature's stomach wall and worked my way to its massive liver. Here on this dark bulk, in the flush of my maturity, with hundreds of my companions, I had a magnificent food debauch which now, after almost three months, is just coming to a close.

As both male and female I have poured out eggs and sperm in a single fecund stream for many weeks. Hundreds of my offspring are calling even now from grass blades where they await the toss of nature's coin which will decree life or death. I have exchanged soaring thoughts with my adult associates, ranging over many an abstruse field of mathematics and philosophy. What a pity this must end! My hold on the shriveled organ is weakening; there is no strength in my anterior sucking disc. Soon I shall pass. This is farewell to whoever is recording my story. If only we had more time, or useful appendages, or even motility, but. . . . no . . . I . . .

The above is a record, clarified by the inclusion of certain equivalent names and phrases, of the autobiographical recitation of a strange little organism found by Gobal Denoty on the third planet of the recently discovered system. A study of the writings of the extinct race of bipeds which lately dominated the planet indicates that they were completely unaware of this creature's remarkable mental powers, and listed it merely as a degenerate flatworm, a parasite of sheep: the liver fluke, Fasciola hepatica.

FOOTNOTE TO OZ

It has been pointed out to us that some readers might misinterpret a passage in Martin Gardner's "The Royal Historian of Oz" (F&SF, January, 1955, p. 78) in which Mr. Gardner quotes a letter from the artist Ralph Fletcher Seymour describing L. Frank Baum in his Chicago days. Mr. Seymour wants it clearly understood that he was recalling the impressions of his youthful innocence and that he did not wish to imply the slightest denigration of Baum's moral character. We offer our apologies to the Historian's son, Frank Baum, and to any others whom we may inadvertently have offended.

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"Have you ever thought," Fritz Leiber once asked, "what a ghost of our times would look like?" Leiber went on to produce one horrible and convincing answer in his classic Smoke Ghost; *but other answers are possible, including one that is chilling enough in its way, but also wryly comic. This new kind of "ghost of our times" you'll meet as J. B. Priestley bitingly sketches a middle-class family and tells of the first ghost who ever haunted a television set.*

Uncle Phil on TV

by J. B. PRIESTLEY

UNCLE PHIL'S INSURANCE MONEY came to a hundred and fifty pounds, so that night the Grigsons had a family conference about it, in the big front room above the shop. They were all there — Mum and Dad, Ernest, Una and George her husband (Fleming was their name, but of course Una was a Grigson and George helped Dad in the shop), and even Joyce and young Steve, who were usually off and out and stayed out, as Mum said, till all hours. As a matter of fact Mum, who had let herself cool down and had tidied her hair for once, looked very proud and happy to see them all together like that, just as if it was Christmas though it was only October and her feet weren't so bad as they always were at Christmas. It was nice, even though Uncle Phil had been Mum's elder brother and now he was dead and this hundred and fifty pounds was his insurance.

"It's mine by rights of course," said Mum, referring to the money, "but I think — and so does Dad — it ought to be spent on something for the family."

"Had him to keep," said Dad darkly, "and had to put up with him."

"I'll say," cried young Steve.

"You be quiet," said Mum. "I won't say you hadn't to put up with him, but he did pay his share —"

"Not lately he didn't," said Dad. "Worked out all right at first, when prices weren't so bad, but not lately it didn't. Not at twenty-three shillings a week."

"That's right," said Ernest, who was a railway clerk and very steady, so steady that sometimes he hardly seemed alive at all. "Some of us had

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him to keep. I'm not saying we oughtn't to have. I'm just making the point, that's all."

"I wish somebody'd come to the point," cried Joyce, who of course wanted to be off again. "If there *is* one."

"That'll do, you saucy monkey," said Mum, who soon lost her temper with Joyce. "Just remember this was Uncle Phil's money in a way. And now he's Passed On." And then she could have bit her tongue off, saying a silly thing like that. For now a shadow settled over the family gathering.

The doctor, an impatient and over-worked man, had been very angry about Uncle Phil's passing on, which ought not to have happened when it did. Uncle Phil had had a very bad heart, and the doctor had warned Mum and Dad that the things Uncle Phil had to take, when he felt an attack coming on, had to be within easy reach. But that Tuesday morning somebody had put Uncle Phil's box of things up on the mantelpiece, where he couldn't reach them when his last fatal attack had come on. A lot of questions had been asked, of course, but nobody could remember putting it up there; and it had been all very awkward and even downright nasty. It hadn't been done on purpose, even the doctor didn't suggest that, but somebody in the family had been very careless. And there was no getting away from the fact that for various good reasons they were all glad, or at least relieved, that Uncle Phil was no longer with them. He hadn't liked them any more than they'd liked him. Even Mum had never been really fond of him. Dad had tried to put up with him, you couldn't say more than that. And the younger members of the family had always disliked and feared the sarcastic old man, with his long sharp nose and sharper tongue, his slow movements, his determined refusal to leave the fireside even when they were entertaining friends and hated to have him there watching them. Before he had come to them, he had worked for some Loan Company, nothing but moneylenders really, in Birmingham, and perhaps this job had made him very hard and cynical; you might say nasty-minded. Also, some accident he'd had made him carry his head on one side, so that he always looked as if he was trying to see round a corner; and even this, to say nothing of the rest of him, got on their nerves. So naturally it was a relief to know that never again would they see him coming in to dinner, so deliberate and slow, his head on one side, his long nose seeming to sniff at them and their doings, a hard old man all ready to make some cutting remark. But at the same time it was awkward because of those things that were up on the mantelpiece when they ought to have been on the little table by his chair. So while Mum was telling herself what a daft donkey she'd been, everybody else was silent.

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Then Mum for once was glad George Fleming was such a brassy sort of chap. "Here, we've had the funeral once, we don't want it again," cried George. "He's gone, and that's that. And I'm not going to pretend I'm sorry. He never liked me and I never liked him. If you ask me, he looked like a pain in the neck, and he was one —"

"Every time, George," young Steve shouted.

"I couldn't agree more," cried Joyce, who picked up a lot of fancy talk at work even if she didn't pick up much money there.

"Let me finish," said George, frowning at the young Grigsons, for whom he was more than a match. "You've got this hundred and fifty quid, Ma. And you don't know what to do with it — right? Well, I got an idea. Something we could all enjoy."

This was more like it. Mum gave him an encouraging smile. "And what would that be, George?"

"Television set," replied George, looking round in triumph.

Then everybody began talking at once, but George, who didn't look like a bull for nothing, managed to shout them down. "Now listen, listen! We've got TV here in Smallbridge at last, and comes over good too. What more d'you want? Gives you everything. Sport for me and Dad and Steve. Plays and games and all that for you women. Dancing and fashion shows too. Variety turns we'd all like. Serious stuff for Ernest. Ask your friends in to enjoy it."

That was what clinched it for Mum, who had several friends who certainly wouldn't be able to afford a set of their own for some time; she saw herself bringing them in and telling then what was in store. So she made herself heard above the babble that broke out again. "What would a nice set cost, George?"

"You could get a beauty," replied George, who always knew the price of everything, "for a hundred and twenty quid. Saw one at Stock's the other day. Might get a bit of a discount from Alf Stocks too."

Dad and Ernest nodded a grave assent to this. Una, who wouldn't have dared do anything else, supported her husband. Joyce hinted that a home with a good television set might be more popular with herself and girl and boy friends. Young Steve was all for it, of course. So it was agreed that George should take advantage of the first slack half-hour in the shop the next day and go along to Stocks's to bargain for the hundred-and-twenty-quid beauty. Then there was much excited gappy talk about TV programmes and who could be asked in to see them and who couldn't; and clearly there was a general feeling, although even George dared not openly express it, that fate had been kind in exchanging Uncle Phil, whom nobody wanted, for this new wonder of the world.

Two days later, before Dad and George had come up from the shop and the others had returned from

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work, the television set, with aerial and everything in order, was there in the front sitting-room, looking a beauty indeed. Alf Stocks himself showed Mum and Una how to work it, and wouldn't leave until he'd seen each of them turn it on and off properly, which took some time because Mum was flustered. As soon as Alf Stocks had gone, Mum and Una looked at one another, and though it was nearly time to be getting a meal ready for Joyce and the men, they decided to have a look by themselves for ten minutes or so. Una turned it on, not having any trouble at all, and it began showing them a film that looked like an oldish cowboy film, which wasn't exactly their style, still it was wonderful having it in the sitting-room like that. The people were small and not always easy to see and their voices were loud enough for giants, which made it a bit confusing; but they watched it for quarter of an hour, and then Mum said they'd have to be getting the meal ready or there'd be trouble. Una wanted to keep it on, but Mum said that would be wasting it. So they turned it off, just after the Sheriff had been getting some evidence about the rustlers from Drywash Pete the Oldtimer.

They didn't say anything for a minute or two, while Una was starting to lay the table and Mum began doing the haddock. Then Mum popped out of the kitchen, and looked at Una as if she had something rather important to say but didn't know how to start. And Una looked at her too, not saying anything either. Then finally Mum said: "Una, did you happen to notice that other little man who was there — you know in that last bit we saw — with the Sheriff?"

"What about him?" asked Una, who had now started cutting bread.

"Well, did you notice anything?"

"Seeing that you're asking — I did." But she went on cutting bread.

"What, then?"

"I thought, just for a sec," said Una, sawing away at the loaf and sounding very calm, "he looked just like Uncle Phil. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes it is," said Mum, "and it gave me quite a turn."

"Just a what's-it — coincidence," said Una. "There — that ought to do."

"Plenty," said Mum. "It's only getting stale if you cut too much. There's some of that sponge in the tin. I'll get it. Yes, of course — as you say — just a coincidence. Nearly made me catch my breath, though. I wouldn't say anything to the others, Una. They'd only laugh."

"George included. And then he'd tell me he'd had quite enough of Uncle Phil. So I won't say anything." Una waited a moment. "Who you having in tonight to look at it?"

"We'll settle that when they all come in," replied Mum rather proudly.

There was a bit of trouble, as Mum guessed there would be, when

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they all did come in. Joyce and Steve, with some timid backing by Una, were in favour of what amounted to a continuous performance by the set. Dad and Ernest were dead against this idea, which they thought wasteful and silly. They wanted to make a sort of theatre of it, with everybody sitting in position a few minutes before the chosen programme was ready to start, and then lights turned off and *Quiet, please!* and all that. George Fleming thought that was going too far but he was against the continuous touch too. One thing they had to decide, he pointed out, was how many people could sit in comfort and see the set properly. So he and Steve went and worked it out and after some argument agreed that you could manage a dozen, that is, if you brought up the old settee as a sort of dress circle. Meanwhile an argument had broken out among the women about who ought to be invited for this first evening, until Dad, with some moral support from Ernest, put his foot down, as he said, and declared that tonight it would be family only. Ernest, who was inclined to look on the dark side, said they needed at least one evening of it to make sure the set worked properly and didn't make them look silly.

Mum had been disappointed at first but after they had washed up and tidied, and Joyce, staying in for once, and Steve had arranged the chairs in front of the set, she felt it was nice and cosy to have a television show just for themselves. George, who had had a technical session with Alf Stocks in the shop, took charge of the set in his masterful way, so that Dad, who had a bit too much of George at times, whispered to Mum that they ought not to have let him buy the set for them, because now you'd think he owned it. However, there they all were, Dad and Ernest with their pipes going, Una and Joyce eating toffee-deluxe, and the set winking brightly at them. There was some argument about how much light there ought to be in the room, and this was settled finally by switching off the bowl lamps in the centre and leaving on the standard on the other side. Then the television picture looked bright, sharp and lovely.

The first item, dullish for the Grigsons, was about how men trained for various sports. Mum and Una were bored with it until near the end, when there was a scene of boxers in a gymnasium. Not that they cared about that of course, but the point was that some men who weren't boxers appeared in this scene, carrying things about or just looking in, and among these men — just seen in a flash, that's all — was a little elderly man who carried his head to one side and seemed to have a long nose. Steve, who was always quick, spotted him and sang out that a little chap had just gone past who looked like old Uncle Phil. The others didn't notice or didn't bother to say anything; but Mum and Una

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gave each other a look, and, as they said afterwards, felt quite peculiar, because, after all, this was the second time.

Well, next was a snooty lady talking about clothes, with some models helping her, and of course this was all right because no men came into it at all. But the only one who liked it much was Joyce, who thought about nothing but clothes and boys.

Then — and this was when the bother really started — there was a sort of game, about telling where you were born, a very popular programme that had had a lot of write-ups in the papers. A lovely actress was in it, as well as that man who was always in these shows just because at any minute he might be very rude and have to apologise afterwards. But there was also a sort of jury, who didn't do much but just sit there and see fair play. Ten of them altogether — four women and six men; and you never saw them long, just a glimpse now and then, and it was specially hard to get a good look at the end man farthest away. Which was a pity so far as the others were concerned, because then they might have understood at once. But Mum, beginning to shake, didn't think this time it was somebody who looked like Uncle Phil, she knew very well it *was* Uncle Phil. In fact, she couldn't be certain he hadn't given her one of his nasty looks.

"Una, just a minute," she said shakily, as soon as the newsreel started, and off she went into the back room, trusting that Una would have sense enough to follow her. The next minute they were staring at one another, out of sight and sound of the others, and Mum knew at once that Una was as worried as she was.

"You saw him at the end there, didn't you, Una?" she asked, after giving herself time to catch her breath.

"Yes, and this time I thought it really *was* him," said Una.

"I *know* it was. I'll take my dying oath it was."

"Oh — Mum — how could it be?"

"Don't ask me how it could be," cried Mum, nearly losing her temper. "How should I know? But there he was — yes, and I'm not sure he didn't give me one of his looks."

"Oh — dear!" Una whispered, her eyes nearly out of her head. "I was hoping you wouldn't say that, Mum. Because I thought he did too, then I thought I must have been making it up."

"Una, that's three times already," said Mum, not sharp now but almost ready to cry. "I'm certain of it now. That was him in the film. That was him in the boxing. Don't tell me it's a what's-it — just accidental. He's there."

"Where?"

"Now don't start acting stupid, Una. How do I know where? But already we've seen him three times,

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and if I know him this is only his first try. It'll be a lot worse soon, you'll see. It's just like him trying to spoil our pleasure."

"Oh — Mum — how could he? Listen, I believe we were thinking about him —"

"It wasn't thinking about him —"

"I expect you were and you didn't know it," Una continued with some determination. "Same with me. Then we think we see him—"

"I *know* I saw him," cried Mum, exasperated. "How many times have I to keep telling you?"

"You'll see — it'll wear off."

"Wear off! You'll get no wearing off from him. I tell you, he's there, just to spite us, and he's staying there. You watch!"

While they were staring at one another, not knowing what to say next, Steve popped his head in. "Come on, you two. Bathing show next. Boy — oh boy!" Then he vanished.

"You go, Una," said Mum, her voice trembling. "It'll look funny if neither of us goes, and I can't face him again tonight. I'm going to make myself a cup of tea. Honestly, I'd give the show away if I went."

"Well," said Una, hesitating, "I suppose I ought. I can't see how he could be there — and I believe it's all our fancy. But if I did see him again, I'd scream — couldn't stop myself." And she went off rather slowly to the front room.

Mum was just pouring out her tea when she heard the scream. The next moment Una came flying in, followed by her husband, who looked annoyed. "Mum, he was there again."

"What's the idea?" George demanded, like a policeman.

"I'll tell him," cried Mum. "You sit down and drink that tea, Una dear. Now then, George Fleming, you needn't look at me like that. Just listen for once. Una's upset because she must have seen Uncle Phil again. We'd seen him three times before — and that must have been the fourth. He was there again, wasn't he, Una? Yes, well I'm not surprised." She looked severely at George, daring him to laugh. "He was there, wasn't he? Tell me the truth now, George."

"Why should I lie?" said George, not even smiling. "I'll admit it's quite a coincidence. Twice I noticed a chap who looked very like Uncle Phil —"

"Four times I've seen him now," cried Una, sitting with her cup of tea. "Honestly I have, George."

"And you can't explain it, can you?" And now George *was* smiling, as he looked from one harassed woman to the other.

"How can anybody explain it?" said Mum crossly. "He's there, that's all."

"Come off it, Ma," said George. "You'll be telling me next he's haunting us. Couldn't be done. Let's have a bit of common sense. I can explain it."

"Oh — George — can you?" Una

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was all relief, gratitude and devotion.

"Certainly." George waited a moment, enjoying himself. Mum could have slapped him. "Look — they have to have a lot of chaps round when they're doing these scenes — chaps with the cameras, lights and all that. Well, it just happens that one of 'em — who keeps getting into the picture when he oughtn't — looks like Uncle Phil — head on one side and so forth. And this set reminds you of Uncle Phil — bought with his money — so every time you see this chap you tell yourself it must be him, though of course it couldn't be — stands to reason."

"That's it, George," cried Una. "Must be. Mum — we were just being silly."

But Mum, who could be very obstinate at times, wasn't so easily persuaded. "I see what you mean, George. But I don't know. I can't believe these television chaps are as old as that. And what about that look he gave me?"

"Oh — come off it," said George, losing his patience. "You imagined that. How could the chap take a look at you? He was just looking at the camera, that's all. Now let's pack this up and go back and enjoy ourselves. Come on — some variety turns next. You don't want to spoil it for everybody, do you?"

This artful appeal was too strong even for Mum's misgivings, and George triumphantly escorted them to the front room. The variety show was about to begin; already a band was playing a lively tune. Mum found herself looking round with satisfaction at the expectant faces of her family. This was more like it, what she'd hoped for from a television set.

Three girls did a singing and dancing turn, to start off with, and it wasn't bad. Ernest, who was sitting next to Mum, breathed hard at them, but whether out of approval or disapproval, she didn't know. Since that dark fancy girl at the confectioner's had given him up, Ernest had seemed to be off women, but of course you could never tell, steady as he was. Next turn was a nice-looking young chap who played an accordion, and Mum felt secretly in agreement with Joyce who loudly declared he was "smashing." He finished off with some nice old panto songs that they all began to sing. Now at last Mum felt really happy with the set. And of course just after that was when it had to happen.

A conjurer appeared, a big comical fellow who pretended to be very nervous. George told them he was the top turn of the show, very popular. He did one silly trick and then pretended to do another and make a mess of it, which made them all laugh a lot. Then he said he'd have to have somebody from the audience, though there wasn't any audience to be seen. As soon as he said that, as Mum told them afterwards, she suddenly felt nerv-

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ous. And then there he was, giving them a nasty sideways grin — Uncle Phil.

"I won't have it," Mum screamed, jumping up. "Turn it off, turn it off." But before anyone could stop her, she had turned it off herself. As they gaped at her, she stood in front of the set and stared at them defiantly.

"What's the matter with you?" cried Dad, looking at her as if she'd gone mad. And as the others all began talking, he turned on them: "Now you be quiet. I'm asking Mum a question. We can't all talk at once."

Joyce started giggling and Steve gave a loud guffaw, as boys of that silly age always do.

"Do you mean to say, Fred Grigson," said Mum, glaring at him, "that you haven't noticed him yet? Five times — counting the one I didn't see but Una did — he's turned up already, and this is only the first night we've had it. Five times!"

"What you talking about?" asked Dad angrily. "Five times what? Who's turned up?"

"Uncle Phil," said Una quickly, and then burst into tears. "I've seen him every time." And she went stumbling out of the room, with George, who was a good husband for all his faults, hurrying after her.

Dad was flabbergasted. "What's the matter with her? I wish you'd talk sense. What's this about Uncle Phil?"

"Oh — don't be such a silly donkey," cried Mum. "He keeps coming into these television pictures. Haven't you got any eyes?"

"Eyes? What's eyes got to do with it?" Dad shouted, thoroughly annoyed now. "I've got some sense, haven't I? Phil's dead and buried."

"I know he is," said Mum, nearly crying. "That's what makes it so awful. He's doing it on purpose, just to spoil it for us."

"Spoil it for us?" Dad thundered. "You'll have me out of my mind in a minute. Here, Ernest, did you see anybody that looked like Uncle Phil?"

Later, round the supper table, they sorted it out. Una and Mum were certain they had seen Uncle Phil himself five and four times respectively. George said he had seen a camera man, or somebody who looked like Uncle Phil, three times. After maddening deliberation, Ernest agreed with George. Joyce said she had twice seen somebody who looked the spit image of Uncle Phil. Steve kept changing his mind, sometimes agreeing with his mother and Una, sometimes joining the Coincidence School. Dad from first to last maintained that he had seen nobody that even reminded him of Uncle Phil and that everybody else had Uncle Phil on the brain.

"Now you just listen to me, Dad," said Mum finally. "I know what I saw and so does Una. And never mind about any coincidences. They wouldn't make me jump every time

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like that. Besides I know that look of his, couldn't miss it."

"How on earth —" Dad began, but she wouldn't let him go on.

"Never mind about *how on earth*," Mum shouted. "Because I don't know and you don't know and nobody does. What I'm telling you is that he's got into that set somehow and there'll be no getting him out. It'll get worse and worse, you mark my words. And if we've any sense we'll ask Alf Stocks to take that set away and give us our money back."

This roused George, who made himself heard above the others. "Oh — come off it, Ma. Alf Stocks would never stop laughing if we told him he'd have to take that set back because Uncle Phil's haunting it. Now — be reasonable. You and Una got excited and started imagining things. Everything'll be okay tomorrow night, you'll see."

"Oh — will it? That's what you say."

"Of course it's what I say. It's what we all say."

"Have it your own way," said Mum darkly. "Just keep on with it. But don't say I didn't warn you. He's there — and he's staying there — and if you ask me, this is only the start of it. He'll get worse before he gets better. Wherever he is, he's made up his mind we shan't enjoy a television set bought with his insurance money. You'll see."

In the middle of the following afternoon, when Mum and Una had the place to themselves and usually enjoyed a quiet sensible time together, they were both restless. They had gone into the front room, to sit near the windows and keep an eye on the street below, but it was obvious that they would never settle down. There in its corner was the TV set with its screen that looked like an enormous blind eye. For some minutes they pretended not to notice it. Finally, Una said: "I looked in the *Radio Times* and there's a programme for women this afternoon."

"I know," said Mum rather grimly. "I looked too."

"We'd be all right with that, surely? In any case —"

"In any case — what?" Mum still sounded rather grim.

"Well," said Una timidly, "don't you think we might have got a bit worked up last night — and — imagined things?"

"No, I don't," said Mum. Then, after a moment: "Still, if you want to turn it on — turn it on. If it's a women's programme — middle of the afternoon too — perhaps he won't show up. He used always to have a sleep in the afternoon."

"But — listen, Mum. As George says —"

"Never mind what George says. George doesn't know it all even though you'd sometimes think he does. But go on — turn it on, if you want to."

Una walked across and rather gingerly manipulated the switches.

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With an absent-minded air, Mum arrived in front of the set and sat down in a chair facing it. The next minute they were looking at and listening to the matron of a girls' hostel, a woman so determinedly refined that she sounded quite foreign.

"You see, it's all right," said Una, when the matron had been followed by two girls playing the violin and piano.

"So far," said Mum, "but give him time. Still — this is very nice, I must say."

After the music a man came on to talk about buried treasure. He was a youngish chap, schoolmaster type, very nervous and sweating something terrible. "You'd be surprised at what some of us have found," he told them. "And now I want to show you a few things — genuine treasure trove." He beckoned anxiously to somebody off the screen, saying: "If you don't mind — thank you so much."

It was Uncle Phil who walked on, carrying some of the things, and as soon as he was plainly in view he turned that twisted neck of his, looked straight out at Mum and Una, and said: "Talk about treasure! You Grigsons haven't done so bad with that hundred-and-fifty quid of mine."

"You see — talking to us now," screamed Mum as she dashed forward. "But I'll turn him off." And as she did, she added firmly: "And that's the last time he does that to me. I'll not give him another chance. God knows what he'll be saying soon!" She pointed an accusing finger at Una, who was still trembling in her chair, and went on: "I suppose we're still a bit worked up and just imagined *that*. Now, Una — you saw him, you heard him — didn't you? Right, then. No going back on it this time."

And Mum marched out and made for the kitchen, where she clattered and banged until it was time for a cup of tea. Steve, who worked in an auctioneer's office and kept odd hours there, was the first home that day, and without saying a word to his mother and sister he hurried straight through into the front room, obviously making for the television set. The two women, who were in the back room, preparing the evening meal, said nothing to him. This, as Una guessed at once, was Mum's new line; no more protesting, no more trying to convince the others; just a grim dark silence, waiting for the final din and flare of "I told you so." As they laid the table, they could hear voices from the set but no actual words. Five minutes, ten minutes, passed.

Then abruptly the voices from the front room stopped. There was a silence that lasted perhaps half a minute, and then Steve, looking quite peculiar, came slowly into the back room. He tried to avoid meeting the questioning stares of the two women. He sat down and looked at the dining-table. "Nearly ready?"

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he enquired, in a small choked voice.

"No it isn't nearly ready," said Mum. "You're very early today. Why did you switch that set off like that?"

"Oh — well," said Steve, wriggling, "didn't seem much point in bothering with a dreary old flick."

This wretched performance hadn't a chance even with Una, and of course Mum could read him as if he were a theatre poster. "Stop that silly nonsense," said Mum. "You saw him, didn't you?"

"Saw who?"

"You know very well who — your Uncle Phil. Didn't you?"

"Well, yes, I thought I did," said Steve carefully.

"Thought you did! You saw him nearly as plain as you can see me, didn't you?"

"No — but I did see him." Steve was clearly embarrassed.

"Did he say anything — I mean, to you?"

"Now, Mum, how *could* he —"

"Stop that," shouted Mum. "I'm having no more of that nonsense. And just you tell your mother the honest truth, Steve. Now — did he say anything to *you*? And if so — what?"

The youth swayed from side to side and looked utterly miserable. "He said I took two shillings of his."

The women gasped. "Now isn't that just like him?" cried Mum. "And you never took two shillings of his, did you?"

"Yes, I did," Steve bellowed unhappily, and then charged out, so that he seemed to be pounding down the stairs before they had time to raise any protest.

"Just what I thought," said Mum before going into her terrible grim silence again. "It'll get worse, like I said."

Sometimes it was nice when the men came up from the shop like boys out of school, hearty and boisterous; and then at other times it wasn't. This was one of the other times. And unfortunately they had decided that the idea of Uncle Phil appearing on television programmes was Humorous Topic Number One, and roared round the place making bad jokes about it. With her lips almost folded away, Mum heard them in the grimmest of silences. Una caught George's eye once or twice, but there was no stopping him. How much was the B.B.C. paying Uncle Phil? Had he got his Union card yet? Would they be starring him in a show soon? And couldn't Ma take a joke these days?

"We haven't all got the same sense of humour, George Fleming," she told him. "And now I'm going out. I promised to go and see Mrs. Pringle."

Una looked dubious. It was the first she had heard of any visit to Mrs. Pringle, and Mum liked to discuss her social engagements well in advance. "Shall I come too?" she asked nervously.

"No reason why you shouldn't,

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Una dear," Mum replied grandly. "We can leave these men to have a nice evening of television. And I hope they enjoy it." And off she went, with Una trailing behind.

A little later, when he had his pipe going, Dad said to George: "Well, that's how they are, and always will be, I expect. Moody. One day they're all for a television set, must have it. Next day, just because of some silly nonsense, won't look at it. Hello!" — this was to Joyce, who came hurrying in — "where've you been, girl?"

"Where d'you think?" cried Joyce. "Working. No, I don't want anything to eat. I'll have something in the Empire caffy. We're going there."

"What's the use of spending all this money on a television set," Dad shouted as she ran upstairs, "if you're going to waste more money at the Empire?"

She stopped long enough to shout down: "You've not talked to Steve, have you?"

"No, haven't seen him yet."

"Well, I have," she cried triumphantly. And that was the last of her.

Dad and George did not wait for Ernest, for they knew he would be late, this being his night for attending his Spanish class. (Nobody knew why he was learning Spanish; perhaps it helped to keep him steady.) So after clearing the table and doing a bit of slapdash washing up (just to show Mum), they moved luxuriously, in a cloud of tobacco smoke, into the front room. They were, as they knew, just in time for *Television Sports Magazine*, a sensible programme they could enjoy all the better for not having a pack of impatient bored women with them.

The first chap to be interviewed for this *Sports Magazine* was a racing cyclist, who could pedal like mad but was no great shakes at being interviewed, being a melancholy youth apparently suffering from adenoids. However, Dad and George had a good laugh at him, legs and all.

"And now for a chat with a typical old sportsman," said the Sporting Interviewer, all cast-iron geniality, "the sort of man who's been watching cricket and football matches and other sporting events for the last sixty years or so. Welcome to Television, Mr. Porritt!"

Mr. Porritt, who came strolling into the picture, was small, old, bent. He carried his head to one side. He had a long and rather frayed nose, and an evil little eye. And without any shadow of doubt he was Uncle Phil.

"No," cried Dad, "it can't be."

"Let's hear what he says," cried George. "Then we'll know for certain."

"Now, Mr. Porritt, you've been watching sport for a good long time, haven't you?" said the Interviewer.

"That's right," said Uncle Phil, grinning and giving Dad and George

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a wicked look. "Saw a lot o' sport, I did, right up to the time when I had the bad luck to go and live at Smallbridge, with a family by the name of Grigson. That finished me for sport — and for nearly everything else."

"How d'you mean?" shouted Dad, jumping up.

"Shop-keeping people," Uncle Phil continued, "in a petty little way — frightened o' spending a shilling or two —"

"No, don't turn him off," shouted George, almost going into a wrestling match with his father-in-law. "Let's hear what he has to say."

"If you think I'm going to sit here listening to slurs and insults," Dad bellowed. "Take your hands off me."

"Listen — listen — look —look!" And George succeeded in holding Dad and keeping him quiet for a few moments.

"Yes, indeed," Mr. Porritt was saying, in rather a haw-haw voice, "the first Test match I ever attended — dear me — this is going back a long time —"

"It's not him now," Dad gasped. "Quite different." Which was true, for the Mr. Porritt they saw and heard now was not at all like Uncle Phil. After a moment or two, Dad said quietly: "Now, never mind Test matches, George. Turn it off. We've got to have a talk about this."

Even though the screen was dark and silent, they both instinctively moved away from it and sat down by the fireplace. "Now then, George," Dad began, with great solemnity, "we've got to get this straight. Now did you or did you not think that Mr. Porritt, when he first started, was Uncle Phil?"

"I was almost certain he was," replied George, who had lost his usual self-confidence. "Last night, I'll admit, I thought it was some B.B.C. chap who happened to look a bit like him —"

"Never mind about last night," said Dad hurriedly. "And did you or did you not hear him talk about us — very nasty of course —?"

"I did," said George, who began to feel he was in a witness box.

"So did I," said Dad, and then, perhaps realising that this bald statement was something of an anticlimax, he raised his voice: "And it don't make sense. Couldn't happen. Here's a man who's dead and buried —"

"I know, Dad, I know," cried George hastily. "And I agree — it couldn't happen —"

"Yes, but it *is* happening —"

"Not really," said George, looking very profound.

"How d'you mean — *not really*?" cried Dad, nettled. "Saw and heard for yourself, didn't you?"

"If you ask me," said George slowly and weightily, "it's like this. Uncle Phil's not in there, couldn't possibly be. He's on our minds, in our heads, so we just *think* he's there. And of course," he continued,

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brisker now, "that's what was the matter with Una and Mum. They kept seeing him last night, like they said, and you can bet your boots they saw and heard him — or thought they did — today, before we came up from the shop. And I'll tell you another thing, Dad. Young Steve dashed out again, before we were back, didn't he? And Joyce said she'd talked to him."

"You think they got mixed up in it, do you?"

"Young Steve was, I'll bet you anything. And whatever it was he saw and heard, it sent him out sharp and upset Mum and Una — see?"

Dad re-lit his pipe but performed this familiar operation rather shakily. His voice had a tremble in it too. "This is a nice thing to happen to decent respectable people. Can't amuse themselves quietly with a TV set — hundred-and-twenty-pound set too — without seeing a kind of ghost — who starts insulting 'em. Here, George, do you think all the other people hear what he says?"

"No, of course they don't. They just hear Mr. Porritt."

"But it isn't Mr. Porritt all the time."

"I know — but I mean, whoever it ought to be. Don't you see," and George leant forward and tapped Dad on the knee, "we only imagine he's there."

This annoyed Dad. "But why should I imagine he's there? I'll tell you straight, George, I'd had more than enough of Brother Phil when he was alive, without any imagining. All I wanted tonight was a *Sports Magazine* — not any insults from that miserable old sinner. I call this downright blue misery."

They were still arguing about it, without taking another look at the set, when Ernest came in. "Hello," he said, "aren't we having any television tonight?"

"No," said Dad, and was about to explain why when George gave him a sharp nudge.

"Just having an argument about something we heard on it earlier," said George. "You turn it on whenever you like, Ernest."

Ernest said he would as soon as he had put on his slippers and old coat, which was something he always made a point of doing when he came home in the evening. And while Ernest was outside, George explained to Dad why he had given him that nudge. "Let's see what Ernest makes of it."

"I don't see Ernest imagining anything," said Dad. "If Ernest sees Uncle Phil, then Uncle Phil's there all right."

"Now then," said Ernest, a few minutes later, as he looked at the *Radio Times*, "— ah — yes — *Current Conference* — a discussion programme, I believe. That should be interesting — and we're just in time for it." He sounded like somebody, the ideal stooge, taking part in a dull programme.

When the set came to life, George and Dad rather stealthily moved

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nearer. Ernest had planked himself dead in front of it, looking as if TV had been invented specially for him. The screen showed them some chaps sitting round a table, looking pleased with themselves. The room was immediately filled with the sound of their voices, loud and blustering in argument. The camera moved around the table, and sometimes went in for a close-up. These politicians and editors seemed to be arguing about the present state of the British People, about which they all apparently knew a great deal. A shuffling at the door made Dad turn round, and then he saw that Mum and Una had returned and were risking another peep. They ignored him, so he pretended he hadn't seen them. Meanwhile, the experts on the British People were all hard at it.

"And now, Dr. Harris," cried the Chairman, "you've a good deal of specialised knowledge — and must have been thinking hard — so what have you to say?"

A new face appeared on the screen, and it belonged to a head that was held on one side and had a long nose and the same old wicked look. Dr. Harris nothing! It was the best view of Uncle Phil they had had yet.

"What have I to say?" Uncle Phil snarled. "Zombies. Country's full o' zombies now. Can't call 'em anything else. Don't know whether they're alive or dead — and don't care. Zombies. And if you want an example, just take Ernest Grigson of Smallbridge —"

"Stop it," screamed Mum from the doorway. "He gets worse every time."

George had the set switched off in three and a half seconds, probably a record so far.

Ernest looked dazed. "I must have dropped off," he explained to them all, "because I seemed to see Uncle Phil and thought he mentioned my name —"

"And so he did, you pie-can," roared Dad. Then he turned to George: "I suppose you're going to say now we all imagined that together. Urrr!"

"It's just his wicked devilment," cried Mum, coming in and joining them now. "Is this his first go tonight?"

"Not likely, Ma," said George, and explained what had happened to the *Sports Magazine*.

"Personal slurs and insults every time now," said Dad bitterly.

"But wait a minute," said Ernest, looking more dazed than ever and speaking very carefully. "Even if he was alive, they wouldn't have Uncle Phil on that *Current Conference* programme. I mean to say, they only have —"

"Oh — for goodness sake, Ernest!" cried Una. "What's the use of talking like that? I'll scream in a minute."

Mum looked severely at the men. "Now you'll perhaps believe me when I tell you what happened when Una and me turned it on earlier — yes, and what happened to poor

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Steve." And they had to listen to a very full account of Uncle Phil's earlier appearances. Just when it was becoming unbearably complicated, it was sharply interrupted.

A little procession of young people marched into the room. Steve had a youth his own age with him, and Joyce, looking pale but determined, was accompanied by two watery-eyed spluttering girl friends and a scared-looking boy friend.

"We've been talking," said Joyce, "and I'm going to turn that set on, see for myself, and nobody's going to stop me." Nobody did stop her.

They all looked and listened in silence. A rather dolled-up woman appeared on the screen, and was saying: "Well, that's one point of view. And now for another. What do you think, Inspector Ferguson?"

"Here we go," muttered George. "I'll bet you a quid."

There was a gasp from all the Grigsons. This time Uncle Phil's horrible sharp face filled the whole screen, and his voice, when it came, was louder than ever before.

"Take the case of an elderly man with heart disease," said Uncle Phil. "When an attack comes on, he has to crush some pill things in his mouth — or he's a goner. And suppose somebody — just a young niece perhaps — deliberately puts those life-savers out of his reach — so when he has an attack he'll finish himself trying to get to them — it's a kind of murder —"

"Not on purpose I didn't — you dirty lying old weasel!" Joyce screamed, and then threw the stool at the screen.

Next morning, Alf Stocks was there, shaking his head at Mum. "No use telling me it's brand-new and priced at a hundred-and-twenty. Tube's done in, see — that's the trouble. I'm taking a chance offering you twenty-five for it. Yes, I dare say it was an accident, but then some accidents —" and then, as Mum said afterwards, he gave her a sharp, sideways, old-fashioned look — "are very expensive."

Winner in the Arthur C. Clarke Title Contest

In our July issue we published an Arthur C. Clarke story and offered a $200 prize to the reader who sent in the most apt and effective title for it. The response was overwhelming, and F&SF's editorial staff had a difficult time choosing the winner. But after much consultation, the entry of Eleanor Nemovicher of New York City was selected as the best. Our $200 check and our congratulations have already gone to Eleanor Nemovicher — we would now like to offer our thanks to all you readers who responded so well, and to wish each of you better luck next time.

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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

I AM WRITING THIS BOOK COLUMN just after learning of the sudden death, in San Francisco on July 15, of Joseph Henry Jackson, literary editor of the San Francisco *Chronicle*, often described as "the greatest bookman west of the Mississippi" (and one may question the geographical limitation), under whom almost as many reviewers (including me) have learned their craft as writers have theirs under John Campbell.

By now you'll have read elsewhere many tributes to Mr. Jackson; but I'd like to stress one aspect of his mind which was of particular importance to readers of this magazine. Jackson recognized always that book-publishing is not merely a matter of potential best sellers or favorites of the New Critics. He knew that much enduring and important writing appears in the specialized and often neglected fields; and he carefully surrounded himself with a staff of specialists who could seriously analyze those specialty books too often indiscriminately dismissed by book review sections.

Fact-crime (of which Jackson was himself a superb scholar), the detective story, paperback originals, supernatural stories, science fiction — all received in the *Chronicle* a critical recognition matched in few other periodicals. In our own field in particular, Jackson encouraged feature reviews of fantasy-specialty books from the earliest Arkham House days, and commissioned a regular monthly column on science-fantasy (conducted originally by me, and today by the shrewdly discriminating Don Fabun) almost ten years ago, coinciding with the publication of Groff Conklin's first anthology, a good three years before most trade publishers and trade reviewers had so much as heard the term *extrapolation*.

American book-reviewing is the poorer for this untimely death (may he rest in peace); and you and I in particular, we with an interest outside of the main current of publishing, have suffered an immeasurable loss.

Two of the world's most celebrated living philosophers are represented on current lists with fantasy fiction; and the contrast is acute. For writers outside of the field, when they chance to venture within its limits, are apt either to soar gaily over the heads of the day-in-day-out

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pros, or to fall flat on their faces; and our two philosophers nicely exemplify the two fates.

Lin Yutang's LOOKING BEYOND (Prentice-Hall, $4.95*) is a novel of the year 2004 which is not so much science fiction as (despite its frequent denials) a Utopia — the distinction being essentially this: Science fiction (be it satirical, critical, even hopefully constructive) is about a future society which, granted certain factors, *might* or even *would* develop. A Utopia describes a society which *should* develop . . . and the hell with imparting any plausibility to its evolution. Mr. Lin's South Pacific isle of Thainos (about as probable as its neighbor Bali Hai) is a sort of hedonist-humanist-Hellenic demi-paradise, depicted in almost 140,000 words devoid of story, action or characterization. This one might easily overlook if the incessant talk were rewardingly provocative; but though the author takes his discussions seriously enough to provide a three-page index to their topics (a unique addendum to a novel), he and his personages have surprisingly little to say.

The most complete contrast possible is afforded by Bertrand Russell's NIGHTMARES OF EMINENT PERSONS (Simon & Schuster, $3.50*). For Lord Russell, as he demonstrated two years ago in SATAN IN THE SUBURBS, is one of those superbly gifted British amateurs of fiction (like Carroll, Tolkien, Haldane, Dunne) whom a professional can hardly hope to rival — and he never looses a satiric barb without the most penetrating knowledge of the location and vulnerability of the bull's-eye. This volume (small for the price, but most attractively designed, with illustrations by Charles W. Stewart) contains ten "nightmares," brief and deft glimpses of the logical consequences of certain modes of limited thinking, and two more fully developed short novelets, each projecting a satiric future evolved by the science-fictional rather than the Utopic method. "I hold," writes the narrator of one nightmare, "that the intellect must not be taken as a guide in life, but only as affording pleasant argumentative games and ways of annoying less agile opponents." If you share this attitude, at least for certain sportive moments, you aren't apt to find better games anywhere.

Readers of this department should know by now that I tend to become almost inarticulate when faced with the problem of reviewing Willy Ley. He is so much the best of popular expounders of science, always entertaining without ever abandoning the firmest scholarly standards, that the normal repertory of reviewers' superlatives seems inadequate. Mr. Ley is at his best in SALAMANDERS AND OTHER WONDERS: STILL MORE ADVENTURES OF A ROMANTIC NATURALIST (Viking, $3.95*); much though I enjoy Ley on space travel or on the history of rockets or on primitive geography or on any other

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of his numerous specialties, this "romantic naturalist" vein has always seemed to me his most appealing. Much of this latest collection of 12 essays is purely factual, starting with a brilliantly divagatious-yet-cohesive piece which leads somehow from cave-salamanders straight into Russian scientific politics; but some of the articles are speculative, almost fantastic, including investigations of the possible existence of such legendary Things as the Abominable Snowman (probably yes, says Ley) and the Man-Eating Tree of Madagascar (definitely *no*). Read these essays (some of them intensively detailed expansions of Ley's columns in *Galaxy*) for educational information on the odder aspects of life on Sol III, or simply for delightful entertainment, wittily and charmingly presented. You can't go wrong.

Eric Burgess is no Ley as far as readability goes; but his FRONTIER TO SPACE (Macmillan, $4.50* — and not to be confused with the Bleiler-Dikty anthology FRONTIERS IN SPACE) is a valuable book for factual reference — particularly for the reader with an adequate technical and mathematical background. Here Burgess has assembled the definitive collection to date of material on high-altitude research: complete data on all of the extraordinary projects for study of the upper atmosphere and the borderland between atmosphere and Space. Almost all of this is contemporary fact, far too little known to most readers (and writers); the one extrapolative section works out the details of the "deep-space probe" — a provocative concept of beginning our ventures into space by establishing unmanned instrument-satellites in permanent orbit around our planetary neighbors. (Does a similar notion from some Burgess of other times and places account for those un-moon-like moons, Deimos and Phobos?)

Other current non-fiction is saucerous. George Adamski's- INSIDE THE SPACE SHIPS (Abelard-Schumann, $3.50*) has its ready-made audience in the uncounted readers of Mr. Adamski's collaboration with Desmond Leslie, FLYING SAUCERS HAVE LANDED; and these devout, who agree with the author that "He who has the truth asks not for proof, for his inner feeling recognizes that truth which is in itself proof," will doubtless not even notice the acute inconsistencies between this book and its predecessor. Truman Bethurum's ABOARD A FLYING SAUCER (DeVorss, $3*) is, oddly, a different matter. One is irresistibly convinced of Bethurum's sincerity and good will, if not of his factual data; and this account of his adventures with lovely space captain Aura Rhanes has psychological interest (not unlike that of Dr. Lindner's *The Jet-Propelled Couch*) and a certain naive charm.

* Books marked with an asterisk may be obtained through F&SF's Readers' Book Service; see page 128.

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To reassure you, I should state in advance that this British import (from that ever terse and delightful magazine Lilliput) *does* not *involve cricket, that (to Americans) most mystifying of all man's athletic endeavors. Instead it concerns itself with such more readily comprehensible affairs as heavy matter, hyper-gravity, the lot of the scientist and the infallible luck of a recently retired Prime Minister.*

The Cricket Ball

by AVRO MANHATTAN

THE FERROUS-LIQUID SUBSTANCE crashed to the ground with a heavy thud, concentrated itself into the shape of a ball, rolled slowly out of the shed, reached the middle of the road, then stopped. Its path across the reinforced concrete was marked by a deep furrow, as though it had rolled through clay.

Professor Lay looked at his watch. 3:33 P.M. His experiment had succeeded. He had created a substance of unknown specific gravity which now, by an unfortunate chance, was lying in the middle of the road.

"Here," said P. C. Jelks, "what's this?"

The Professor and the policeman looked at the ball. "It's gone and ploughed up the road," said Jelks. He looked uneasy. "What is it?"

"In certain stars," the Professor said, "the atoms are squeezed in such a way that the matter of which they are composed is unusually heavy. In Van Maanen, for instance, a star where matter is 300,000 times the density of water, a pinhead would shoot through your hand like a bullet."

"I see," said P. C. Jelks. He seemed to be about to examine his hand, as though this might clarify the situation. "You know best, sir, I'm sure," he said. "Better get it back into your workshop. We don't want to hold up the traffic." P. C. Jelks wished to have nothing more to do with the object.

"I don't think I can," the Professor said. He bent down and tried to pick up the ball. It would not move.

"Is it stuck?" P. C. Jelks asked. He raised his large boot and kicked the ball, then staggered back, clutching his foot. The ball had not moved.

Nobby Clark, from the garage,

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pulled up in his van. "No football here, mate," he told P. C. Jelks, an old enemy.

"It's stuck," Jelks said, too surprised to retaliate.

Nobby got out of the van. He shoved the ball with his foot. "What is it?" he asked the Professor.

"An experiment," Professor Lay said. "Have you any tools? I'd like to get it back into my workshop."

Nobby produced a 7-lb. hammer. He swung it sideways at the ball, giving it all he'd got. The hammer bounced back. Nobby gave a roar, dropped the hammer, and sucked his fingers.

"That blow would have dislocated at least 300-lbs.," Professor Lay said. "Most interesting. The ball must weigh more."

The local fire-engine swept round the corner, summoned by P. C. Jelks. The firemen looked at the ball. As usual, their talent for improvisation came to the rescue. They laid the loop of a wire hawser round the ball, and made the other end of the hawser fast to the fire-engine. The driver of the fire-engine started off slowly in first gear. The hawser snapped a minute later, making a considerable mess of the fire-engine.

A police car drew up. Four policemen in flat caps jumped out. Soon afterwards the road was cordoned off, and a screen of sacking was erected round the ball. The Prime Minister was informed, and a guarded statement given to the newspapers, to the effect that a mishap in the neighbourhood of a War Office experimental station had placed a small area out of bounds to the general public. There was, however, no cause for alarm, as no radioactive materials were involved.

The three War Office brass-hats arrived in time for tea, which was provided by local representatives of the Women's Institute and served in the screened-off space by P. C. Jelks.

"Professor Lay," the General said, "we don't like this publicity. Most unbecoming."

"The ball rolled out of my workshop," the Professor explained. "Some sudden, extra-gravitational pull. I was unable to stop it."

"Get a tank crane," the General snapped.

It was some time before the crane crew could get a satisfactory grip on the object. They tried digging out the concrete around it but as they did so the ball seemed to sink further in. Eventually they modified a grab to grip the ball like a vice.

The crane's engine roared. The hawsers hummed. The crane visibly vibrated with the vast effort it was making. The ball did not move.

"Give it full throttle, man!" the General shouted. "It's Government property."

The grab broke. So did the crane boom. They had to send to Aldershot for another crane to remove the first one. The General and the other brass-hats returned to the War Office, to write reports about faulty equipment now being provided for

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Her Majesty's Forces by civilian concerns which should certainly be brought under immediate military discipline.

Next morning the national newspapers — their source of inspiration being Nobby Clark — had whipped the nation into such a state of anxiety about Professor Lay's object that crowds gathered outside Downing Street shortly after breakfast. Everyone present — men, women and children — were insistent that something must be done. There had even been a cable from the Australian Premier asking what steps were being taken to prevent the ball falling right through the centre of the earth and coming out the other side, possibly wrecking the wicket so carefully prepared for the Fourth Test.

The Prime Minister himself appeared several times on the steps of No. 10, giving the V-sign. As a method of raising the ball, however, it seemed to be inadequate.

By lunch time there were even more dramatic developments. The extremist wing of the Opposition, at the same time as demanding the resignation of the Government, suggested that Britain's hydrogen bomb should be dropped on the offending ball, thus removing it and a predominantly Tory constituency at the same time.

The American Air Force, using jet bombers from Greenham Common, flew in the world's biggest crane in sections — a 250 tonner. Krupps, of Essen, 'phoned to say that in another hour's time they would have completed a 500 ton crane.

After lunch the Prime Minister left Downing Street by car to examine the problem on the spot. He was now seen to be giving the V-sign with a ping-pong ball held between the fingers.

The site by now was a maze of temporary railway lines, cranes, fire-engines, troops, trades union representatives and, on the outskirts, grandstands erected by Butlin's Holiday Camps, Ltd. The P.M. made his way through to the inner screens with difficulty.

"I'm sorry about this, sir," the Professor said. "Somewhat unforeseen complications."

The P.M. grunted. He looked at the ball, which by now had become highly polished by the various lifting devices which had been clamped round it. He poked at it angrily with his walking stick. The ball jumped out of the groove in which it lay, and rolled gently down the camber of the road, to come to rest in the gutter.

Professor Lay laughed. He looked at his watch. 3:33 P.M. "I should have thought of that," he said, "An unstable compound. Its molecular structure deteriorates after —" he looked at his watch again — "twenty-four hours. I must see what I can do about it."

He picked up the ball and put it in his pocket. "A scientist's work is never done," he said. He went into his workshop and shut the door.

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At about the time this issue appears, Isaac Asimov will be the Guest of Honor at the 13th World Science Fiction Convention, and with good cause: Now only 35, Asimov has been writing and selling science fiction for almost seventeen years (and creating still-recognized classics as long ago as 1941). His range has been unbelievably wide, from hypergalactic epics rivaling E. E. Smith in length and scope to the latest development — brief vignettes as concise and funny as those of Fredric Brown (which you'll be reading in F&SF *in the near future). But out of all his range, which also includes both light verse and weighty textbooks, I think he'll be most remembered for two things: his formulation of the logical Laws of Robotics in the celebrated positronic-robot series, and his highly successful attempts to fuse science fiction with the formal detective story. Last January we brought you* The Singing Bell, *the first of the detective adventures of Dr. Wendell Urth. Here is a second puzzle for the plump extraterrologist . . . and for* you, *as you are challenged by the assurance that, though the crime could take place only in the space-future, every clue is fairly presented for a solution by today's reader.*

The Talking Stone

by ISAAC ASIMOV

THE ASTEROID BELT IS LARGE AND its human occupancy small. Larry Vernadsky, in the seventh month of his year-long assignment to Station Five, wondered with increasing frequency if his salary could possibly compensate for a nearly solitary confinement seventy million miles from Earth. He was a slight youth, who did not bear the look of either a spationautical engineer or an asteroid man. He had blue eyes and butter-yellow hair and an invincible air of innocence that masked a quick mind and an isolation-sharpened bump of curiosity.

Both the look of innocence and the bump of curiosity served him well on board the *Robert Q.*

When the *Robert Q.* landed on the outer platform of Station Five, Vernadsky was on board almost immediately. There was an eager delight about him which, in a dog, would have been accompanied by a vibrating tail and a happy cacophony of barks.

The fact that the captain of the

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Robert Q. met his grins with a stern, sour silence that sat heavily on his thick-featured face made no difference. As far as Vernadsky was concerned the ship was yearned-for company and was welcome. It was welcome to any amount of the millions of gallons of ice or any of the tons of frozen food concentrates stacked away in the hollowed-out asteroid that served as Station Five. Vernadsky was ready with any power-tool that might be necessary, any replacement that might be required for any hyperatomic motor.

Vernadsky was grinning all over his boyish face as he filled out the routine form, writing it out quickly for later conversion into computer notation for filing. He put down ship's name and serial number, engine number, field generator number and so on, port of embarkation ("asteroids, damned lot of them, don't know which was last" and Vernadsky simply wrote "Belt" which was the usual abbreviation for "asteroid belt"); port of destination ("Earth"); reason for stopping ("stuttering hyperatomic drive.")

"How many in your crew, Captain?" asked Vernadsky, as he looked over ship's papers.

The Captain said, "Two. — Now how about looking over the hyperatomics? We've got a shipment to make." His cheeks were blue with dark stubble, his bearing that of a hardened and life-long asteroid miner, yet his speech was that of an educated, almost a cultured, man.

"Sure." Vernadsky lugged his diagnostic kit to the engine room, followed by the captain. He tested circuits, vacuum degree, force-field density with easy-going efficiency.

He could not help wondering about the captain. Despite his own dislike for his surroundings he realized, dimly, that there were some who found fascination in the vast emptiness and freedom of space. Yet he guessed that a man like this captain was not an asteroid miner for the love of solitude alone.

He said, "Any special type of ore you handle?"

The captain frowned and said, "Chromium and manganese."

"That so? — I'd replace the Jenner manifold, if I were you."

"Is that what's causing the trouble?"

"No, it isn't. But it's a little beat-up. You'd be risking another failure within a million miles. As long as you've got the ship in here —"

"All right. Replace it. But find the stutter, will you?"

"Doing my best, Captain."

The captain's last remark was harsh enough to abash even Vernadsky. He worked a while in silence, then got to his feet. "You've got a gamma-fogged semi-reflector. Every time the positron beam circles round to its position the drive flickers out for a second. You'll have to replace it."

"How long will it take?"

"Several hours. Maybe twelve."

"What? I'm behind schedule —"

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"Can't help it." Vernadsky remained cheerful. "There's only so much I can do. The system has to be flushed for three hours with helium before I can get inside. And then I have to calibrate the new semi-reflector and that takes time. I could get it almost right in minutes but that's only almost right. You'd break down before you reach the orbit of Mars."

The captain glowered. "Go ahead. Get started."

Vernadsky carefully maneuvered the tank of helium on board the ship. With ship's pseudo-grav generators shut off, it weighed virtually nothing, but it had its full mass and inertia. That meant careful handling if it were to make turns correctly. The maneuvers were all the more difficult since Vernadsky himself was without weight.

It was because his attention was concentrated entirely on the cylinder that he took a wrong turn in the crowded quarters and found himself momentarily in a strange and darkened room.

He had time for one startled shout and then two men were upon him, hustling his cylinder, closing the door behind him.

He said nothing, while he hooked the cylinder to the intake valve of the motor and listened to the soft, soughing noise as the helium flushed the interior, slowly washing absorbed radioactive gases into the all-accepting emptiness of space.

Then curiosity overcame prudence and he said, "You've got a silicony aboard ship, Captain. A big one."

The captain turned to face Vernadsky slowly. He said in a voice from which all expression had been removed, "Is that right?"

"I saw it. How about a better look?"

"Why?"

Vernadsky grew imploring, "Oh, look, Captain, I've been on this rock over half a year. I've read everything I could get hold of on the asteroids, which means all sorts of things about the siliconies. And I've never seen even a little one. Have a heart."

"I believe there's a job here to do."

"Just helium-flushing for hours. There's nothing else to be done till that's over. How come you carry a silicony about, anyway, Captain?"

"A pet. Some people like dogs. I like siliconies."

"Have you got it talking?"

The captain flushed. "Why do you ask?"

"Some of them have talked. Some of them read minds, even."

"What are you? An expert on these damn things?"

"I've been reading about them. I told you. Come on, Captain. Let's have a look."

Vernadsky tried not to show that he noticed that there was the captain facing him and a crewman on either side of him. Each of the three was larger than he was, each weightier, each (he felt sure) was armed.

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Vernadsky said, "Well, what's wrong? I'm not going to steal the thing. I just want to see it."

It may have been the unfinished repair job that kept him alive at that moment. Even more so, perhaps, it was his look of cheerful and almost moronic innocence that stood him in good stead.

The captain said, "Well, then, come on."

And Vernadsky followed, his agile mind working and his pulse definitely quickened.

Vernadsky stared with considerable awe and just a little revulsion at the gray creature before him. It was quite true that he had never seen a silicony, but he had seen trimensional photographs and read descriptions. Yet there is something in a real presence for which neither words nor photographs are substitutes.

Its skin was of an oily, smooth grayness. Its motions were slow, as became a creature who burrowed in stone and was more than half stone itself. There was no writhing of muscle beneath that skin; instead it moved in slabs as thin layers of stone slid greasily over one another.

It had a general ovoid shape, rounded above, flattened below, with two sets of appendages. Below were the "legs," set radially. They totaled six and ended in sharp flinty edges, reinforced by metal deposits. Those edges could cut through rock, breaking it into edible portions.

On the creature's flat undersurface, hidden from view unless the silicony were overturned, was the one opening into its interior. Shredded rocks entered that interior. Within, limestone and hydrated silicates reacted to form the silicones out of which the creature's tissues were built. Excess silica re-emerged from the opening as hard white pebbly excretions.

(How extraterrologists had puzzled over the smooth pebbles that lay scattered in small hollows within the rocky structure of the asteroids until the siliconies were first discovered. And how they marveled at the manner in which the creatures made silicones — those silicon-oxygen polymers with hydrocarbon side-chains — perform so many of the functions that proteins performed in terrestrial life.)

From the highest point on the creature's back came the remaining appendages, two inverse cones hollowed in opposing directions and fitting snugly into parallel recesses running down the back, yet capable of lifting upward a short way. When the silicony burrowed through rock, the "ears" were retracted for streamlining. When it rested in a hollowed-out cavern, they could lift for better and more sensitive reception. Their vague resemblance to a rabbit's ears made the name of *silicony* inevitable. The more serious extraterrologists, who referred to such creatures habitually as *Siliconeus asteroidea*, thought they might have something

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to do with the rudimentary telepathic powers the beasts possessed. A minority had other notions.

The silicony was flowing slowly over an oil-smeared rock. Other such rocks lay scattered in one corner of the room and represented, Vernadsky knew, the creature's food supply. Or at least, it was its tissue building supply. For sheer energy, he had read, that alone would not do.

Vernadsky marveled. "It's a monster. It's more than a foot across."

The captain grunted non-committally.

"Where did you get it?" asked Vernadsky.

"One of the rocks."

"Well, listen, two inches is about the biggest anyone's found. You could sell this to some museum or university on Earth for a couple of thousand dollars, maybe."

The captain shrugged. "Well, you've seen it. Let's get back to the hyperatomics."

His hard grip was on Vernadsky's elbow and he was turning away, when there was an interruption in the form of a slow and slurring voice, a hollow and gritty one.

It was made by the carefully modulated friction of rock against rock and Vernadsky stared in near horror at the speaker.

It was the silicony, suddenly become a talking stone. It said, "The man wonders if this thing can talk."

Vernadsky whispered, "For the love of space. It does!"

"All right," said the captain, impatiently. "You've seen it and heard it, too. Let's go now."

"And it reads minds," said Vernadsky.

The silicony said, "Mars rotates in two four hours three seven and one half minutes. Jupiter's density is one point two two. Uranus was discovered in the year one seven eight one. Pluto is the planet which is most far. Sun is heaviest with a mass of two zero zero zero zero zero zero —"

The captain pulled Vernadsky away. Vernadsky, half walking backward, half stumbling, listened with fascination to the fading bumble of zeroes.

He said, "Where does it pick up all that stuff, Captain?"

"There's an old astronomy book we read to him. Real old."

"From before space-travel was invented," said one of the crew members in disgust. "Ain't even a fillum. Regular print."

"Shut up," said the captain.

Vernadsky checked the outflow of helium for gamma radiation and, eventually, it was time to end the flushing and work in the interior. It was a painstaking job, and Vernadsky interrupted it only once for coffee and a breather.

He said, with innocence beaming in his smile, "You know the way I figure it, Captain? That thing lives inside rock, inside some asteroid all its life. Hundreds of years, maybe. It's a damn big thing, and it's probably a lot smarter than the run-of-

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the-mill silicony. Now you pick it up and it finds out the universe isn't rock. It finds out a trillion things it never imagined. That's why it's interested in astronomy. It's this new world, all these new ideas it gets in the book and in human minds, too. Don't you think that's so?"

He wanted desperately to smoke the captain out, get something concrete he could hang his deductions on to. For this reason he risked telling what must be half the truth. (The lesser half, of course.)

But the captain, leaning against a wall with his arms folded, said only, "When will you be through?"

It was his last comment and Vernadsky was obliged to rest content. The motor was adjusted finally to Vernadsky's satisfaction, and the captain paid the reasonable fee in cash, accepted his receipt and left in a blaze of ship's hyper-energy.

Vernadsky watched it go with an almost unbearable excitement. He made his way quickly to his subetheric sender.

"I've got to be right," he muttered to himself. "I've *got* to be."

Patrolman Milt Hawkins received the call in the privacy of his home-station on Patrol Station Asteroid No. 72. He was nursing a two-day stubble, a can of iced beer, and a film-viewer, and the settled melancholy on his ruddy, wide-cheeked face was as much the product of loneliness as was the forced cheerfulness in Vernadsky's eyes.

Patrolman Hawkins found himself looking into those eyes and was glad. Even though it was only Vernadsky, company was company. He gave him the big hello and listened luxuriously to the sound of a voice without worrying too strenuously concerning the contents of the speech.

Then suddenly amusement was gone and both ears were on the job and he said, "Hold it. Ho — ld it. What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you been listening, you dumb cop? I'm talking my heart out to you."

"Well deal it out in smaller pieces, will you? What's this about a silicony?"

"This guy's got one on board. He calls it a pet and feeds it greasy rocks."

"Huh? I swear, a miner on the asteroid run would make a pet out of a piece of cheese if he could get it to talk back to him."

"Not just *a* silicony. Not one of these little inch jobs. It's over a foot across. Don't you get it? Space, you'd think a guy would know something about the asteroids, living out here."

"All right. Suppose you tell me."

"Look, greasy rocks build tissues but where does a silicony that size get its energy from?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"Directly from — Have you got anyone around you right now?"

"Right now, no. I wish there were."

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"You won't in a minute. Siliconies get their energy by the direct absorption of gamma rays."

"Says who?"

"Says a guy called Wendell Urth. He's a big-shot extraterrologist. What's more, he says that's what the silicony's ears are for." Vernadsky put his two forefingers to his temples and wiggled them. "Not telepathy at all. They detect gamma radiation at levels no human instrument can detect."

"Okay. Now what?" asked Hawkins. But he was growing thoughtful.

"Now this. Urth says there isn't enough gamma radiation on any asteroid to support siliconies more than an inch or two long. Not enough radioactivity. So here we have one a foot long, a good fifteen inches."

"Well—"

"So it has to come from an asteroid just riddled with the stuff, lousy with uranium, solid with gamma rays. An asteroid with enough radioactivity to be warm to the touch and off the regular orbit patterns so that no one's come across it. Only suppose some smart boy landed on the asteroid by happenstance and noticed the warmth of the rocks and got to thinking. This captain of the *Robert Q.* is no rock-hopping ignoramus. He's a shrewd guy."

"Go on."

"Suppose he blasts off chunks for assay and comes across a giant silicony. Now he *knows* he's got the most unbelievable strike in all history. And he doesn't need assays. The silicony can lead him to the rich veins."

"Why should it?"

"Because it wants to learn about the universe. Because it's spent a thousand years, maybe, under rock, and it's just discovered the stars. It can read minds and it could learn to talk. It could make a deal. Listen, the captain would jump at it. Uranium mining is a state monopoly. Unlicensed miners aren't even allowed to carry counters. It's a perfect setup for the captain."

Hawkins said, "Maybe you're right."

"No maybe at all. You should have seen them standing around me while I watched the silicony, ready to jump me if I said one funny word. You should have seen them drag me out after two minutes."

Hawkins brushed his unshaven chin with his hand and made a mental estimate of the time it would take him to shave. He said, "How long can you keep the boy at your station?"

"Keep him! Space, he's gone!"

"What! Then what the devil is all this talk about? Why did you let him get away?

"Three guys," said Vernadsky, patiently, "each one bigger than I am, each one armed, and each one ready to kill, I'll bet. What did you want me to do?"

"All right, but what do we do now?"

"Come out and pick them up.

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That's simple enough. I was fixing their semi-reflectors and I fixed it my way. Their power will shut off completely within ten thousand miles. And I installed a tracer in the Jenner manifold."

Hawkins goggled at Vernadsky's grinning face. "Holy Toledo."

"And don't get anyone else in on this. Just you, me, and the police cruiser. They'll have no energy and we'll have a cannon or two. They'll tell us where the uranium asteroid is. We locate it, *then* get in touch with Patrol Headquarters. We will deliver unto them, three, count them, three, uranium smugglers, one giant-size silicony like nobody on Earth ever saw, and one, I repeat, one great big fat chunk of uranium like nobody on Earth ever saw, either. And you make a lieutenancy and I get promoted to a permanent Earth-side job. Right?"

Hawkins was dazed. "Right," he yelled. "I'll be right out there."

They were almost upon the ship before spotting it visually by the weak glinting of reflected sunlight.

Hawkins said, "Didn't you leave them enough power for ship's lights? You didn't throw off their emergency generator, did you?"

Vernadsky shrugged. "They're saving power, hoping they'll get picked up. Right now, they're putting everything they've got into a sub-etheric call, I'll bet."

"If they are," said Hawkins, dryly, "I'm not picking it up."

"You're not?"

"Not a thing."

The police cruiser spiraled closer. Their quarry, its power off, was drifting through space at a steady ten thousand miles an hour.

The cruiser matched it, speed for speed, and drifted inward.

A sick expression crossed Hawkins' face. "Oh, *no!*"

"What's the matter?"

"The ship's been hit. A meteor. Lord knows there are enough of them in the asteroid belt."

All the verve washed out of Vernadsky's face and voice. "Hit? Are they wrecked?"

"There's a hole in it the size of a barn-door. Sorry, Vernadsky, but this might not look good."

Vernadsky closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He knew what Hawkins meant. Vernadsky had deliberately mis-repaired a ship, a procedure which could be judged a felony. And death as a result of a felony, was murder.

He said, "Look, Hawkins, you know why I did it."

"I know what you've told me and I'll testify to that if I have to. But if this ship wasn't smuggling . . ."

He didn't finish the statement. Nor did he have to.

They entered the smashed ship in full space-suit cover.

The *Robert Q.* was a shambles, inside and out. Without power, there was no chance of raising the feeblest screen against the rock that hit

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them or of detecting it in time or of avoiding it if they had detected it. It had caved in the ship's hull as though it were so much aluminum foil. It had smashed the pilot room, evacuated the ship's air, and killed the three men on board.

One of the crew had been slammed against the wall by the impact and was so much frozen meat. The captain and the other crewman lay in stiff attitudes, skins congested with frozen blood-clots where the air, boiling out of the blood, had broken the vessels.

Vernadsky, who had never seen this form of death in space, felt sick, but fought against vomiting messily inside his space-suit and succeeded.

He said, "Let's test the ore they're carrying. It's *got* to be alive." It's *got* to be, he told himself. It's *got* to be.

The door to the hold had been warped by the force of collision and there was a gap half an inch wide where it no longer met the frame.

Hawkins lifted the counter he held in his gauntleted hand and held its mica window to that gap.

It chattered like a million magpies.

Vernadsky said, with infinite relief, "I told you so."

His mis-repair of the ship was now only the ingenious and praiseworthy fulfillment of a citizen's loyal duty and the meteor collision that had brought death to three men merely a regrettable accident.

It took two blaster bolts to break the twisted door loose and tons of rock met their flashlights.

Hawkins lifted two chunks of moderate size and dropped them gingerly into one of the suit's pockets. "As exhibits," he said, "and for assay."

"Don't keep them near the skin too long," warned Vernadsky.

"The suit will protect me till I get it back to ship. It's not pure uranium, you know."

"Pretty near, I'll bet." Every inch of his cockiness was back.

Hawkins looked about. "Well, this tears things. We've stopped a smuggling ring, maybe, or part of one. But what next?"

"The uranium asteroid — Uh-oh."

"Right. Where is it? The only ones who know are dead."

"Space!" And again Vernadsky's spirits were dashed. Without the asteroid itself, they had only three corpses and a few tons of uranium ore. Good, but not spectacular. It would mean a citation, yes, but he wasn't after a citation. He wanted promotion to a permanent Earthside job and that required something —

He yelled, "For the love of space, the *silicony!* It can live in a vacuum. It lives in a vacuum all the time and *it* knows where the asteroid is."

"Right!" said Hawkins, with instant enthusiasm. "Where is the thing?"

"Aft," cried Vernadsky. "This way."

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The silicony glinted in the light of their flashes. It moved and was alive.

Vernadsky's heart beat madly with excitement. "We've got to move it, Hawkins."

"Why?"

"Sound won't carry in a vacuum, for the love of space. We've got to get it into the cruiser."

"All right. All right."

"We can't put a suit around it with a radio transmitter, you know."

"I said all right."

They carried it gingerly and carefully, their metal-sheathed fingers handling the greasy surface of the creature almost lovingly.

Hawkins held it while kicking off the *Robert Q.*

It lay in the control room of the cruiser now. The two men had removed their helmets and Hawkins was shucking his suit. Vernadsky could not wait.

He said, "You can read our minds?"

He held his breath until finally the gratings of rock surfaces modulated themselves into words. To Vernadsky, no finer sound could, at the moment, be imagined.

The silicony said, "Yes." Then, he said, "Emptiness all about. Nothing."

"What?" said Hawkins.

Vernadsky shushed him. "The trip through space just now, I guess. It must have impressed him."

He said to the silicony, shouting his words as though to make his thoughts clearer, "The men who were with you gathered uranium, special ore, radiations, energy."

"They wanted food," came the weak, gritty sound.

Of course! It was food to the silicony. It was an energy source. Vernadsky said, "You showed them where they could get it?"

"Yes."

Hawkins said, "I can hardly hear the thing."

"There's something wrong with it," said Vernadsky worriedly. He shouted again, "Are you well?"

"Not well. Air gone at once. Something wrong inside."

Vernadsky muttered, "The sudden decompression must have damaged it. Oh, Lord. — Look, you know what I want. Where is your home? The place with the food?"

The two men were silent, waiting.

The silicony's ears lifted slowly, very slowly, trembled and fell back. "There," it said. "Over there."

"Where?" screamed Vernadsky.

"There."

Hawkins said, "It's doing something. It's pointing in some way."

"Sure, only we don't know in what way."

"Well, what do you expect it to do? Give the coordinates?"

Vernadsky said at once, "Why not?" He turned again to the silicony as it lay huddled on the floor. It was motionless now and there was a dullness to its exterior that looked ominous.

Vernadsky said, "The captain

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knew where your eating-place was. He had numbers concerning it, didn't he?" He prayed that the silicony would understand, that it would read his thoughts and not merely listen to his words.

"Yes," said the silicony in a rock-against-rock sigh.

"Three sets of numbers," said Vernadsky. There would have to be three. Three coordinates in space with dates attached, giving three positions of the asteroid in its orbit about the sun. From these data, the orbit could be calculated in full and its position determined at any time. Even planetary perturbations could be accounted for, roughly.

"Yes," said the silicony, lower still.

"What were they? What were the numbers? — Write them down, Hawkins. Get paper."

But the silicony said, "Do not know. Numbers not important. Eating place there."

Hawkins said, "That's plain enough. It didn't need the coordinates, so it paid no attention to them."

The silicony said, "Soon not —" a long pause, and then slowly, as though testing a new and unfamiliar word, "alive. Soon —" an even longer pause "— dead. What after death?"

"Hang on," implored Vernadsky. "Tell me, did the captain write down these figures anywhere?"

The silicony did not answer for a long minute and then, while both men bent so closely that their heads almost touched over the dying stone, it said, "What after death?"

Vernadsky shouted, "One answer. Just one. The captain must have written down the numbers. Where? Where?"

The silicony whispered, "On the asteroid."

And it never spoke again.

It was a dead rock, as dead as the rock which gave it birth, as dead as the walls of the ship, as dead as a dead human.

And Vernadsky and Hawkins rose from their knees and stared hopelessly at each other.

"It makes no sense," said Hawkins. "Why should he write the coordinates on the asteroid. That's like locking a key inside the cabinet it's meant to open."

Vernadsky shook his head. "A fortune in uranium. The biggest strike in history and we don't know where it is."

PART 2

H. Seton Davenport looked about him with an odd feeling of pleasure. Even in repose, there was usually something hard about his lined face with its prominent nose. The scar on his right cheek, his black hair, startling eyebrows and dark complexion all combined to make him look every bit the incorruptible agent of the Terrestrial Bureau of Information that he actually was.

Yet now something almost like a smile tugged at his lips as he looked

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about the large room, in which dimness made the rows of book-films appear endless, and specimens of who-knows-what from who-knows-where bulk mysteriously. The complete disorder, the air of separation, almost insulation, from the world, made the room look unreal. It made it look every bit as unreal as its owner.

That owner sat in a combination armchair-desk which was bathed in the only focus of bright light in the room. Slowly, he turned the sheets of official reports he held in his hand. His hand moved otherwise only to adjust the thick spectacles which threatened at any moment to fall completely from his round and completely unimpressive nubbin of a nose. His paunch lifted and fell quietly as he read.

He was Dr. Wendell Urth, who, if the judgment of experts counted for anything, was Earth's most outstanding extraterrologist. On any subject outside Earth men came to him, though Dr. Urth had never in his adult life been more than an hour's-walk distance from his home on the University campus.

He looked up solemnly at Inspector Davenport. "A very intelligent man, this young Vernadsky," he said.

"To have deduced all he did from the presence of the silicony? Quite so," said Davenport.

"No, no, the deduction was a simple thing. Unavoidable, in fact. A noodle would have seen it. I was referring," and his glance grew a trifle censorious, "to the fact that the youngster had read of my experiments concerning the gamma-ray-sensitivity of *Siliconeus asteroidea*."

"Ah, yes," said Davenport. Of course, Dr. Urth was the expert on siliconies. It was why Davenport had come to consult him. He had only one question for the man, a simple one, yet Dr. Urth had thrust out his full lips, shaken his ponderous head and asked to see all the documents in the case.

Ordinarily, that would have been out of the question; but Dr. Urth had recently been of considerable use to the T.B.I. in that affair of the Singing Bells of Luna and the singular alibi shattered by moon-gravity, and the Inspector had yielded.

Dr. Urth finished the reading, laid the sheets down on his desk, yanked his shirt sleeve out of the tight confines of his belt with a grunt and rubbed his glasses with it. He stared through the glasses at the light to see the effects of his cleaning, replaced them precariously on his nose and clasped his hands on his paunch, stubby fingers interlacing.

"Your question again, Inspector?"

Davenport said, patiently, "Is it true, in your opinion, that a silicony of the size and type described in the report could only have developed on a world rich in uranium —"

"Radioactive material," interrupted Dr. Urth. "Thorium, perhaps, though probably uranium."

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"Is your answer yes, then?"

"Yes."

"How big would the world be?"

"A mile in diameter, perhaps," said the extraterrologist, thoughtfully. "Perhaps even more."

"How many tons of uranium, or radioactive material, rather?"

"In the trillions. Minimum."

"Would you be willing to put all that in the form of a signed opinion in writing."

"Of course."

"Very well then, Dr. Urth," and Davenport got to his feet. He reached for his hat with one hand and the file of reports with the other. "That is all we need."

But Dr. Urth's hand moved to the reports and rested heavily upon them. "Wait. How will you find the asteroid?"

"By looking. We'll assign a volume of space to every ship made available to us and — just look."

"The expense, the time, the effort! — And you'll never find it."

"One chance in a thousand. We might."

"One chance in a million. You won't."

"We can't let the uranium go without some try. Your professional opinion makes the prize high enough."

"But there is a better way to find the asteroid. *I* can find it."

Davenport fixed the extraterrologist with a sudden, sharp glance. Despite appearances, Dr. Urth was anything but a fool. He had personal experience of that. There was therefore just a bit of half-hope in his voice as he said, "How can you find it?"

"First," said Dr. Urth, "my price."

"Price?"

"Or fee, if you choose. When the government reaches the asteroid, there may be another large-size silicony on it. Siliconies are very valuable. The only form of life with solid silicone for tissues and liquid silicone as a circulating fluid. The answer to the question whether the asteroids were once part of a single planetary body may rest with them. Do you understand?"

"You mean you want a large silicony delivered to you."

"Alive, well; and free of charge. Yes."

Davenport nodded. "I'm sure the government will agree. Now what have you on your mind?"

Dr. Urth said quietly, as though explaining everything, "The silicony's remark."

Davenport looked bewildered. "What remark?"

"The one in the report. Just before the silicony died, Vernadsky was asking it where the captain had written down the coordinates, and it said, 'On the asteroid.' "

A look of intense disappointment crossed Davenport's face. "Great Space, doctor, we know that, and we've gone into every angle of it. Every possible angle. It means nothing."

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"Nothing at all, Inspector?"

"Nothing of importance. Read the report again. The silicony wasn't even listening to Vernadsky. He was feeling life depart and he was wondering about it. Twice, it asked 'What after death?' Then, as Vernadsky kept questioning it, it said, 'On the asteroid.' Probably, it never heard Vernadsky's question. It was answering its own question. It thought that after death it would return to its own asteroid — to its home, where it was safe. That's all."

Dr. Urth shook his head. "You are too much a poet, you know. You imagine too much. Come, it is an interesting problem and let us see if you can't solve it for yourself. Suppose the silicony's remark *were* an answer to Vernadsky."

"Even so," said Davenport impatiently, "how would it help? *Which* asteroid? The uranium asteroid? We can't find it, so we can't find the coordinates. Some other asteroid which the *Robert Q.* had used as a home base? We can't find that either."

"How you avoid the obvious, Inspector. Why don't you ask yourself what the phrase 'on the asteroid' means to the silicony. Not to you or to me, but to the silicony."

Davenport frowned. "Pardon me, doctor."

"I'm speaking plainly, What did the word *asteroid* mean to the silicony?"

"The silicony learned about space out of an astronomy text that was read to it. I suppose the book explained what an asteroid was."

"Exactly," crowed Dr. Urth, putting a finger to the side of his snub nose. "And how would the definition go? An asteroid is a small body, smaller than the planets, moving about the sun in an orbit which, generally speaking, lies between those of Mars and Jupiter. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose so."

"And what is the *Robert Q.?*"

"You mean the ship?"

"That's what *you* call it," said Dr. Urth. "The *ship*. But the astronomy book was an ancient one. It made no mention of ships in space. One of the crewmen said as much. He said it dated from before spaceflight. Then what is the *Robert Q.?* Isn't it a small body, smaller than the planets. And while the silicony was aboard wasn't it moving about the sun in an orbit which, generally speaking, lay between those of Mars and Jupiter?"

"You mean the silicony considered the ship as just another asteroid, and when he said, 'on the asteroid,' he meant 'on the ship'."

"Exactly. I told you I would make you solve the problem for yourself."

No expression of joy or relief lightened the gloom on the Inspector's face. "That is no solution, doctor."

But Dr. Urth blinked slowly at him and the bland look on his round face became, if anything, blander

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and more childlike in its uncomplicated pleasure. "Surely it is."

"Not at all. Dr. Urth, we didn't reason it out as you did. We dismissed the silicony's remark completely. But still, don't you suppose we searched the *Robert Q.*? We took it apart piece by piece, plate by plate. We just about unwelded the thing."

"And you found nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Perhaps you did not look in the right place."

"We looked in *every* place." He stood up, as though to go. "You understand, Dr. Urth? When we got through with the ship there was no possibility of those coordinates existing anywhere on it."

"Sit down, Inspector," said Dr. Urth, calmly. "You are still not considering the silicony's statement properly. Now the silicony learned English by collecting a word here and a word there. It couldn't speak idiomatic English. Some of its statements, as quoted, show that. For instance, it said, 'the planet which is most far' instead of 'the farthest planet.' You see?"

"Well?"

"Someone who cannot speak a language idiomatically either uses the idioms of his own language translated word by word or else he simply uses foreign words according to their literal meaning. The silicony had no spoken language of its own so it could only make use of the second alternative. Let's be literal, then. He said, '*on* the asteroid," Inspector. *On* it. He didn't mean on a piece of paper, he meant on the ship, literally."

"Dr. Urth," said Davenport patiently, "when the Bureau searches, it searches. There were no mysterious inscriptions *on* the ship, either."

Dr. Urth looked disappointed. "Dear me, Inspector, I keep hoping you will see the answer. Really, you have had so many hints."

Davenport drew in a slow, firm breath. It went hard, but his voice was calm and even once more. "Will you tell me what you have in mind, doctor?"

Dr. Urth patted his comfortable abdomen with one hand and replaced his glasses. "Don't you see, Inspector, that there is one place on board a spaceship where secret numbers are perfectly safe? Where, although in plain view, they would be perfectly safe from detection? Where, though they were being stared at by a hundred eyes, they would be secure? — Except from a seeker who is an astute thinker, of course."

"Where? Name the place!"

"Why, in those places where there happen to be numbers already. Perfectly normal numbers. Legal numbers. Numbers that are supposed to be there."

"What are you talking about?"

"The ship's serial number, etched directly on the hull. *On* the hull, be it noted. The engine number, the field generator number. A few others. Each etched on integral portions of

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the ship. *On* them, as the silicony said. On the ship."

Davenport's heavy eyebrows rose with sudden comprehension. "You may be right — and if you are, I'm hoping we find you a silicony twice the size of the *Robert Q.*'s. One that not only talks, but whistles, 'Up, Asteroids, Forever'!" He hastily reached for the dossier, thumbed rapidly through it and extracted an official T.B.I. form. "Of course we noted down all the identification numbers we found." He spread the form out. "If three of these resemble coordinates . . ."

"We should expect some small effort at disguise," Dr. Urth observed. "There will probably be certain letters and figures added to make the series appear more legitimate. . . ."

He reached for a scratch-pad and shoved another toward the Inspector. For minutes the two men were silent, jotting down serial numbers, experimenting with crossing out obviously unrelated figures.

At last Davenport let out a sigh that mingled satisfaction and frustration. "I'm stuck," he admitted. "I think you're right: The numbers on the engine and the calculator are clearly disguised coordinates and dates. They don't run anywhere near the normal series, and it's easy to strike out the fake figures. That gives us two . . . but I'll take my oath the rest of these are absolutely legitimate serial numbers. What are your findings, doctor?"

"I agree," Dr. Urth nodded. "We now have two coordinates, and we know where the third was inscribed."

"We know, do we? And how —?" The Inspector broke off and uttered an obscenity much older than space-swearing. "Of course! The number on the very ship itself, which isn't entered here — because it was on the precise spot on the hull where the meteor crashed through. . . . I'm afraid there goes your silicony, doctor." Then his craggy face brightened. "But I'm an idiot. The number's gone, but we can get it in a flash from Interplan Registry."

"I fear," said Dr. Urth, "that I must dispute at least the second part of your statement. Registry will have only the ship's original legitimate number — not the disguised coordinate to which the captain altered it."

"The exact spot on the hull . . . ," Davenport muttered. "And because of that chance shot the asteroid may be lost forever. What use to anybody are two coordinates without a third?"

"Well," said Dr. Urth precisely, "conceivably of very great use to a two-dimensional being. But creatures of our dimensions," he patted his paunch, "do require the third . . . which I fortunately happen to have right here."

"In the T.B.I. dossier? But we just checked the list of numbers —"

"*Your* list, Inspector. Your file also includes young Vernadsky's original report. And of course the se-

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rial number listed there for the *Robert Q.* is the carefully faked one under which she was then sailing — no point in rousing the curiosity of a repair-mechanic by letting him note a discrepancy."

Davenport reached for a scratch-pad and the Vernadsky list. A moment's calculation and he grinned.

Dr. Urth lifted himself out of the chair with a pleased puff and trotted to the door. "It is always pleasant to see you, Inspector Davenport. Do come again. And remember, the government can have the uranium, but I want the important thing: one giant silicony, alive and in good condition."

He was smiling.

"And preferably," said Davenport, "whistling." Which he was doing himself as he walked out.

Coming Next Month

Grand news for all who welcome human values, strong emotions and brilliant writing in science fiction! In our next issue, on the stands around October 1, we'll start a two-part serial by Theodore Sturgeon, bearing the extraordinary (yet wholly justified) title of The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff — *a story as offtrail as the form of its title, and combining warmth and ingenuity as only the incomparable Sturgeon can. We'll celebrate World Series time with a novelet by Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson in which the Hokas take up the Great American Game, with results from which baseball may never recover; and this all-new issue (no reprints this time) will also feature a novelet of crime and fantasy by the fast-paced storyteller Frank Gruber, the F&SF debut of the rising young author (and professional rocket expert) Lee Correy, and stories by Idris Seabright, Alan E. Nourse and other F&SF favorites.*

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From Majorca, where he now resides, via London, where he regularly contributes to Punch, *that assiduous scholar Robert Graves brings us a clear and comprehensive report on the state of witchcraft in this technological age.*

An Appointment for Candlemas

by ROBERT GRAVES

Have I the honour of addressing Mrs. Hipkinson?

That's me! And what can I do for you, young man?

I have a verbal introduction from — from an officer of your organization. Robin of Barking Creek was the name he gave.

If that isn't just like Robin's cheek! The old buck hasn't even dropped me a Christmas card since the year sweets came off the ration, and now he sends me trouble.

Trouble, Mrs. Hipkinson?

Trouble, I said. You're not one of us: Don't need to do no crystal gazing to see that. What's the game?

Robin of Barking Creek has been kind enough to suggest that you would be kind enough to . . .

Cut it out. Got my shopping to finish.

If I might perhaps be allowed to carry your basket? It looks as if it were rather heavy.

O.K., you win. Take the damn thing. My corns are giving me jip.

The fact is, madam, I'm engaged in writing a D.Phil thesis on Contemporary Magology . . .

Eh? What's that? Talk straight, if you please!

Excuse me. I mean I'm a university graduate studying present-day witchcraft; as a means of taking my degree in Philosophy.

Now, that makes a bit more sense. If Robin answers for you I don't see why we couldn't help — same as I got our Deanna up into O level with a bit of a spell I cast on the Modern Secondary School examiners. But don't you trouble to speak in whispers. Them eighteenth-Century Witchcraft Acts is obsolescent now, except as regards fortune-tellers; and we don't touch that lay, not professionally we don't. Course, I admit we keep ourselves to ourselves, but so do the Masons and the Foresters and the Buffs, not to mention the Commies. And all are welcome to our little dos, what consent to be duly pricked in their finger-tips and take

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the oath and give that there comical kiss. The police don't interfere. Got their work cut out to keep up with motoring offences and juvenile crime, and cetera. Nor they don't believe in witches, they say; only in fairies. They're real down on the poor fairies.

Do you mean to say the police wouldn't break up one of your Grand Sabbaths, if . . .

Half a mo'! Got to pop into the Home and Commercial for a dozen rashers and a couple of hen-fruit. Bring the basket along, ducks, if you please. . . .

As you were saying, Mrs. Hipkinson?

Ah yes, about them Sabbaths . . . Well, see, to keep the right side of the Law, on account we all have to appear starko, naturally we hire the Nudists' Hall. Main festivals are quarter-days and cross quarter-days; them's the obligatory ones, same as in Lancashire and the Highlands and everywhere else. Can't often spare the time in between. We run two covens here, used to be three — mixed sexes, but us girls are in the big majority. I'm Pucelle of Coven No. 1, and my boy-friend Arthur O'Bower (radio-mechanic in private life), he's Chief Devil of both. My husband plays the tabor and jew's-trump in Coven No. 2. Not very well up in the book of words, but a willing performer, that's Mr. H.

I hope I'm not being indiscreet, but how do you name your God of the Witches?

Well, we used different names in the old days, before this village became what's called a dormitory suburb. He was Mahew, or Lug, or Herne, I seem to remember, according to the time of year. But the Rev. Jones, our last Chief Devil but two, he was a bit of a scholar: always called the god "Faunus," which is Greek or Hebrew, I understand.

But Faunus was a patron of flocks and forests. There aren't many flocks or forests in North-eastern London, surely?

Too true there aren't; but we perform our fertility rites in aid of the allotments. We all feel that the allotments is a good cause to be encouraged, remembering how short of food we went in the war. Reminds me, got to stop at that fruit stall: horse-radish and a cabbage lettuce and a few nice carrots. The horse-radish is for my little old familiar; too strong for my own taste . . . Shopping's a lot easier since Arthur and me got rid of that there Hitler. . . .

Please continue, Mrs. Hipkinson.

Well, as I was saying, that Hitler caused us a lot of trouble. We don't hold with politics as a rule, but them Natsies was just too bad with their incendiaries and buzz-bombs. So Arthur and I worked on him at a distance, using all the strongest enchantments in the *Book of Moons* and out of it, not to mention a couple of new ones I got out of them Free French Breton sailors. But Mr.

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Hitler was a difficult nut to crack. He was *protected*, see? But Mr. Hitler had given us fire, and fire we would give Mr. Hitler. First time, unfortunately, we got a couple o' words wrong in the formula, and only blew his pants off of him. Next time, we didn't slip up; and we burned the little basket to a cinder. . . . Reminds me of my great-grandmother, old Mrs. Lou Simmons of Wanstead. She got mad with the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, and caused 'im an 'orrid belly-ache on the Field of Waterloo. Done, at a distance again, with toad's venom — you got to get a toad scared sick before he'll secrete the right stuff. But old Lou, she scared her toad good and proper: showed him a distorting looking-glass — clever act, eh? So Boney couldn't keep his mind on the battle; it was those awful gripings in his stomjack what gave the Duke of Wellington his opportunity. Must cross over to the chemist, if you don't mind . . .

For flying ointment, by any chance?

Don't be potty! Think I'd ask that Mr. Cadman for soot and baby's fat and bat's blood and aconite and water-parsnip? The old carcass would think I was pulling his leg. No, Long Jack of Coven No. 2 makes up our flying ointment — Jack's assistant dispenser at the Children's Hospital down New Cut. Oh, but look at that queue! I don't think I'll trouble this morning. An aspirin will do me just as well as the panel medicine.

Do you still use the old-style besom at your merrymakings, Mrs. Hipkinson?

There's another difficulty you laid your finger on. Can't get a decent besom hereabouts, not for love nor money. Painted white wood and artificial bristles, that's what they offer you. We got to send all the way to a bloke at Taunton for the real thing — ash and birch, with osier for the binding — and last time, believe it or don't, the damned fools sent me a consignment bound in nylon tape! Nylon tape, I ask you!

Yes, I fear that modern technological conditions are not favourable to a spread of the Old Religion.

Can't grumble. We're up to strength at present, until one or two of the older boys and girls drop off the hooks. But TV isn't doing us no good. Sometimes I got to do a bit of magic-making before I can drag my coven away from Muffin the Mule.

Could you tell me what sort of magic?

Oh, nothing much; just done with tallow dolls and a bit of itching-powder. I raise shingles on their sit-upons, that's the principle. Main trouble is, there's not been a girl of school age joined us since my Deanna, which is quite a time. It's hell beating up recruits. Why, I know families where there's three generations of witches behind the kids, and do you know what they all say?

I should not like to venture a guess, Mrs. Hipkinson.

They say it's *rude*. *Rude!* That's a good one, eh? Well now, what about

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Candlemas? Falls on a Wednesday this time. Come along at dusk. Nudists' Hall, remember — first big building to the left past the traffic lights. Just knock. And don't you worry about the finger-pricking. I'll bring iodine and lint.

This is very kind of you indeed, Mrs. Hipkinson. I'll 'phone Barking Creek to-night and tell Robin how helpful you have been.

Don't mention it, young man. Well, here's my dump. Can't ask you in. But it's been a nice chat. O.K. then. On Candlemas Eve look out for three green frogs in your shaving-mug; I'll send them as a reminder. . . . And mind, no funny business, Mr. Clever! We welcome good sports, but nosey-parkers has got to watch their step, see? Last Lammas Arthur and me caught a reporter from the *North-Eastern Examiner* concealed about the premises. *Hey presto!* and we transformed him into one of them Australian yellow dog dingoes. Took him down to Regent's Park and let him loose. Made out he'd escaped from the Zoological Gardens; the keepers soon copped him. He's the only dingo in the pen with a kink in his tail; but you'd pick him out even without that, I dare say, by his hang-dog look. Yes, you can watch the dingoes free from the "Scotsman's Zoo," meaning that nice walk along the park railings. Well, cheerio for the present!

Good-bye, Mrs. Hipkinson.

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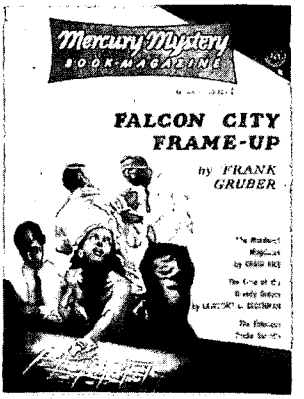

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